



The illustration depicts three characters from the anime 'Ascendance of a Bookworm'. In the background, a man with dark blue hair and a woman with long light blue hair are shown in formal, dark blue and gold-trimmed attire. In the foreground, a young girl with long dark blue hair and large yellow eyes is smiling, holding a small blue bunny plushie. She is wearing a black dress with white ruffled sleeves and a yellow cape. The scene is surrounded by various flowers, including white and purple blooms, and a warm, golden bokeh light effect at the bottom.

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.3

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





The illustration depicts three characters from the anime 'Ascendance of a Bookworm'. In the background, a young man with dark blue hair and a woman with long, straight light blue hair are seated. The man is wearing a dark blue and gold robe, while the woman is in a green and gold robe. In the foreground, a young girl with long blue hair and large yellow eyes is smiling, holding a small blue bunny plushie. She is wearing a black dress with a white ruffled collar and a yellow cape. The background is filled with various flowers, including white and purple ones, and a warm, golden glow.

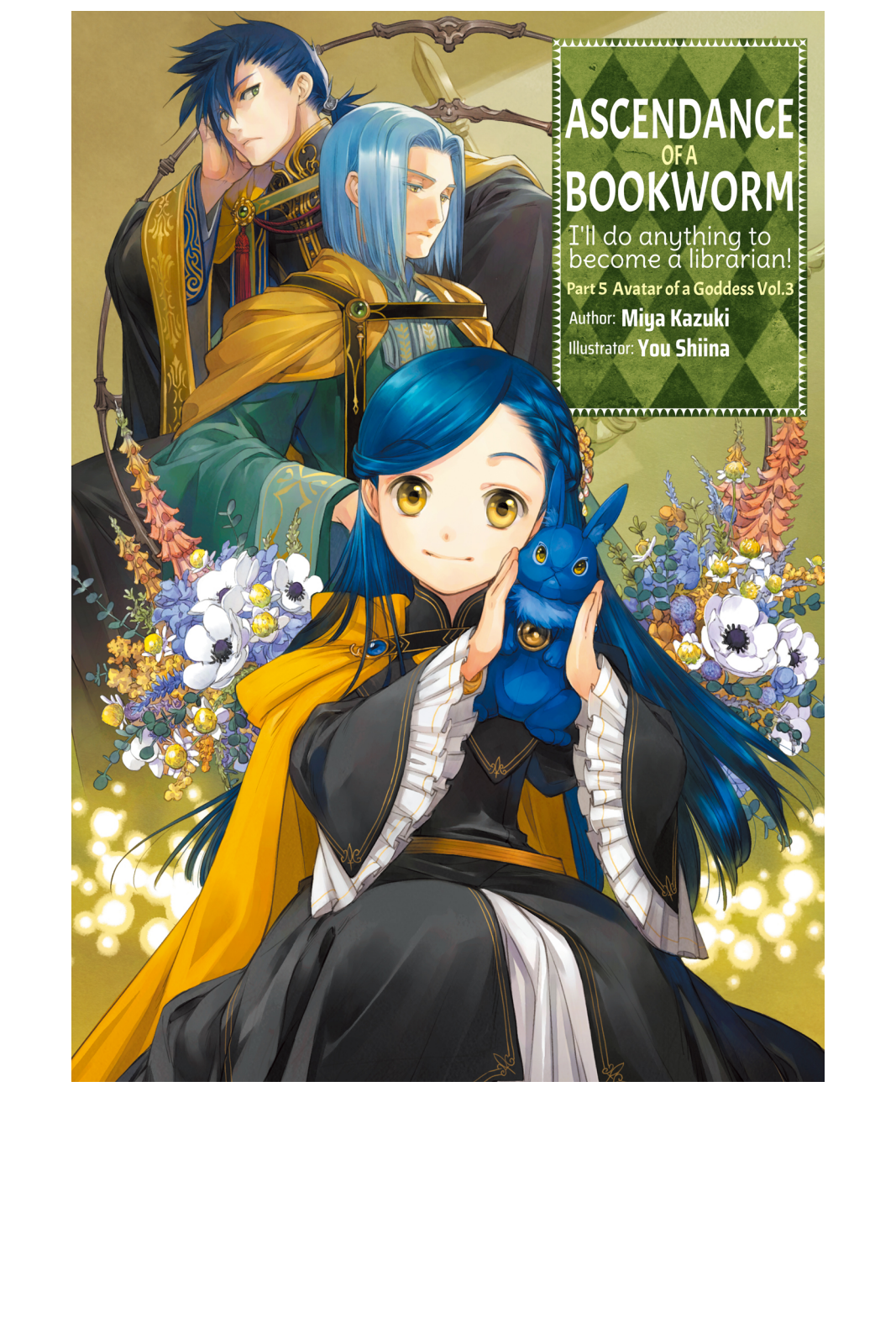
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The book cover features a detailed illustration. In the foreground, a young woman with long blue hair and large yellow eyes is smiling, holding a small blue bunny. She wears a black dress with a white ruffled collar and a yellow cape. Behind her, two other characters are visible: a man with dark blue hair and a woman with long blue hair, both in ornate, dark clothing with yellow and green accents. The background is filled with various flowers, including white and purple blossoms, and a warm, golden light effect at the bottom.

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Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

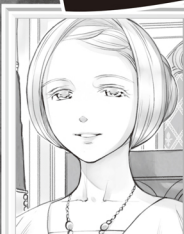
The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



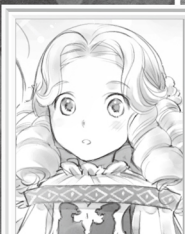
Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



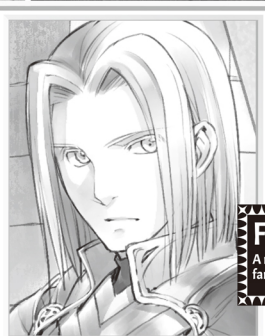
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

Clarissa

.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.

Ortwin

.....A third-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.

Martina

.....A fifth-year apprentice archattendant from Ahrensbach.

Fatiehe

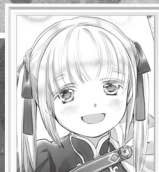
.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Ahrensbach.

Raimund

.....A fourth-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach.
Hirschur's disciple.

Lueuradi

.....A third-year apprentice archscholar from Jossbrenner.

**Hannelore**

A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

**Lestilaut**

A sixth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Students from Other Duchies

Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor.
Professor from the knight course.

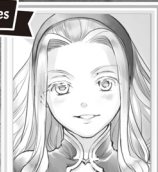
Gundolf.....Drewanchel's dormitory supervisor.
Professor from the scholar course.

Fraularm.....Ahrensbach's dormitory supervisor.
Professor from the scholar course.

Other Royal Academy Affiliates

**Eglantine**

The second prince's first wife. Instructor of the archduke candidate course.

**Detlinde**

A sixth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.
Georgine's daughter.

Trauerqual.....The king. Carries the title of Zent.

Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince.

Hildebrand.....The Sovereignty's third prince.

Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.

Oswin.....Anastasia's head attendant.

Sieglinde.....Dunkelfelger's first wife.

Cordula.....Hannelore's head attendant.

Heissshitze.....An archknight from Dunkelfelger.

Adolphine.....A member of the Drewanchel archducal family. Engaged to the first prince.

Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Letizia.....An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.

Sergius.....Ferdinand's attendant.

Constanze.....Frenbeltag's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

**Anastasia**

The Sovereignty's second prince.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus.....Ferdinand's head attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Thorsten.....Wilfried's scholar. Engaged to Lieseleita.

Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

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Prologue

Ehrenfest's game of ditter against Dunkelfelger had come to an end. There had been some unexpected developments, such as an interruption by the Sovereign Knight's Order, and the royal family's decision to question all of the involved parties, but the match had ultimately ended with Ehrenfest's victory. Rozemyne would not be married into Dunkelfelger.

Matthias sighed in relief, glad to have protected his sworn lady... but it was too soon for him to rest easy. He had noticed a faint scent during that questioning—something that everybody else had most likely missed.

"Can I ask you all to come with me to a meeting room?" Matthias said. "I wish to discuss today's events." He had gone around the dining hall to gather together Laurenz, Leonore, and Judithe—as well as Brunhilde, who had also participated in the ditter match.

"What about me?" asked the young Theodore, but he served Lady Rozemyne only within the Royal Academy. His true lord was Giebe Kirnberger, so he could not participate in these important discussions.

However, Matthias was hesitant to be so direct. He knew how upset Theodore would get about being left out, so he instead said, "I would like to keep this among those who participated in the ditter game."

"But will you not want the perspective of someone who was in the audience?" Theodore asked.

Matthias fell into thought, trying to figure out how he could get Theodore to give up without hurting his feelings... but then Leonore heaved an impatient sigh.

"Theodore, as you only serve Lady Rozemyne here in the Royal Academy, we must draw a line. We do not want our every word to be leaked to Giebe Kirnberger. Or would you like to commit to becoming Lady Rozemyne's retainer?"

Theodore had a lot of potential as a knight, and with Rozemyne already having a shortage of guards, her retainers were eager for him to join them formally. But after a moment spent in thought, Theodore refused the offer.

"My goal is to become a knight of Kirnberger," he said.

After dinner, Rozemyne's five retainers who had participated in the game of ditter gathered in a meeting room. Matthias confirmed

that the door was shut tightly behind them, then turned to Brunhilde.

“How is Lady Rozemyne?”

Brunhilde was an apprentice attendant and could access Rozemyne’s room on the girls’ floor. Matthias could still remember how ghastly pale Rozemyne had looked while she was being carried away. He wanted some kind of update on her situation, like whether she was feeling better, or whether she had at least awakened.

“She is not doing very well...” Brunhilde replied. “Her illness resulted partly from her drinking too many rejuvenation potions, so that means of recovery is not an option here. All we can do is wait for her to awaken. In truth, she developed a fever while we were eating... It seems she is struggling even to breathe.”

At the moment, Rihyarda was off eating her own dinner, while Lieseleta and Gretia were placing a cold washcloth on Lady Rozemyne’s forehead and wiping away her sweat.

Brunhilde grew increasingly pale as she continued, “If only I had not fainted during the match... I could have stopped Lady Rozemyne from consuming too many potions.”

Her voice was full of regret, but an archattendant who had received so little combat training could not be blamed for having fainted in the face of an attack from Rarstark, Dunkelfelger’s strongest apprentice knight. It was an understandable reaction, if anything. Her priority had been to stay inside Rozemyne’s shield, and she had not been trained to defend herself or avoid attacks. The apprentice attendants had only been expected to manage the rejuvenation potions and recognize the different types of offensive magic tools.

“In that case,” Judithe said, “I’m to blame for failing as a guard knight. I allowed Lord Lestilaut to get into the shield and was unable to protect Lady Rozemyne. If I hadn’t taken out my weapon, then I wouldn’t have been knocked out of the shield...”

She was shaking her head in disappointment, her expression clouded, but Matthias did not think she was at fault either. Any guard knight worth their salt would take out their weapon upon seeing their lord or lady in danger. It was precisely what they were trained to do and something they did without thinking.

“I expect that anyone in your situation would have been knocked out of Schutzaria’s shield,” Matthias said. “In fact, you would have failed as a guard knight if you *hadn’t* tried to protect her.”

Laurenz nodded. “Even if you had stayed inside to protect her from Lord Lestilaut, Lady Rozemyne probably would have drunk a rejuvenation potion anyway. We needed her shield to protect us from the intruders’ attacks and as a place to heal the knights.”

Brunhilde frowned. “Laurenz, that is precisely what we should have stopped her from doing. Lord Ferdinand surely would have

scolded us all as failures of retainers, were he here.”

Neither Matthias nor Laurenz understood what she meant. Was this really worthy of such a harsh criticism? Matthias remembered that Rozemyne had used Schutzaria’s shield to protect the students during the ternisbefallen attack last year, and they hadn’t been criticized for that. On this occasion, the shield had been absolutely necessary for warding off the attacks from above, healing the wounded knights, and protecting the noncombatants from the audience.

“But why? If not for Schutzaria’s shield, we would have been—”

Brunhilde shook her head. “Recall that Dunkelfelger does not have Schutzaria’s shield to rely on. Is it not due to the weakness of our apprentice knights that we could not heal ourselves or protect those in the audience without Lady Rozemyne’s assistance?” It was a sharp criticism delivered with narrowed eyes.

Despite what Brunhilde said, Matthias believed that she was ignoring one important detail: it had been Rozemyne’s desire to both make and maintain the shield. “Lady Rozemyne made her shield with a wish to protect everyone. Are her noble actions and spirit not to be respected?”

“They are. However, Lady Rozemyne’s health and safety come first. We, her retainers, failed to act upon that fact.” Her firm amber eyes fell on Matthias and Laurenz. “This is not like when she was overflowing with mana and needed to give some to others. We, the students of Ehrenfest, forced her to go beyond her limits and use more potions than was prescribed to her by Lord Ferdinand, her personal doctor. We know Lady Rozemyne is frail enough that even attending tea parties causes her to collapse, so why did we not intervene? Why are we treating what happened as normal instead of reflecting on ourselves or regretting our misdeeds?”

Brunhilde’s revelation came as such a shock to Matthias that he felt as though someone had just punched him in the back of the head. She was completely right—they were all well aware of Rozemyne’s poor health. And while she had more mana than most, her supply was far from infinite. She, too, would run out if she used too much at once.

And yet, even though Rozemyne had needed to use rejuvenation potions just to maintain the shield, Matthias had not been at all worried about her giving blessings or using mana. He had felt concerned upon seeing her ashen face, but he had not stopped to question how his dependence on her had caused it.

“Brunhilde... I’m ever so sorry...” Leonore said. “We ended up in this situation because I made Lady Rozemyne’s shield an integral part of our plan...”

“Lady Rozemyne was motivated to use it, and it likely was

essential to our victory. I would not have volunteered to participate in the match if not for that shield. That said... the battle ended the moment Lady Hannelore left Dunkelfelger's base, did it not? We should have dispelled the shield then and there, making Lady Rozemyne's health our top priority. As her retainer, I am ashamed that I was unable to."

The apprentice knights had been free to leave the training grounds as soon as the battle was over and could have spent time recovering somewhere safe. Those in the audience could have defended themselves, for the most part; that was why all students were taught to use *geteilt*. As for Charlotte, her guard knights could have flown up to protect her.

Brunhilde's regrets must have stemmed from her being an attendant, Matthias thought. Her viewpoint was different from that of the knights.

"I regret my actions as well," Leonore said, then shot a worried glance in the direction of Rozemyne's room. "I should not have let her heal that unconscious Dunkelfelger apprentice. She was in a much worse state than he was."

Matthias blinked. It was his firm understanding that a retainer's duty was to grant the wishes of their lord or lady and nothing more. Yet even Leonore, a guard knight, was agreeing with Brunhilde.

What is causing them to think like this?

This wasn't just a difference between attendants and guard knights; Leonore and Judithe both agreed with Brunhilde's position. Rather, it was something more fundamental separating his thinking from theirs. This was far from ideal; contrasting ideas of the role of a retainer would possibly lead to misunderstandings or conflict in the future. Matthias wanted to understand their thoughts and intentions before that happened.

"So you say," he interjected, his voice cracking out of anxiety, "but Lady Rozemyne wished to heal the knight, and he was certainly wounded enough to need it. Is it not the duty of a retainer to grant the wishes of their lord or lady?"

"That is not always the case," Brunhilde replied flatly.

Leonore looked contemplative for a moment, then muttered, "I suppose the two of you should know this now that you are name-sworn..." She looked at Matthias and Laurenz. "What I am about to tell you was told to me by Cornelius, as it happened before we all entered Lady Rozemyne's service. Four years ago... Lady Rozemyne's retainers worked only to grant her wishes, with no other thoughts in mind."

Rozemyne had gone off on her highbeast to save Charlotte, who had been kidnapped by Viscount Joisontak. Her guard knights had

separated from her as ordered, determined to grant her every wish—and, during that brief moment, Rozemyne herself had been kidnapped.

Leonore continued, “Her guard knights put her wants above all else, and the consequence was their lady spending two years in a jureve.”

No matter how much gratitude they received from Charlotte, her retainers, or the archducal couple, the guards’ charge remained in a coma. As time passed, her presence in the minds of the people grew increasingly thin, and she became more and more forgotten.

“Their lady eventually awoke to find that life had continued without her. She had missed two years of education and growth, and noble society would not wait for her emotions to stabilize. How do you think Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights felt seeing their lady, whom they had failed to protect, being sent to the Royal Academy before she could catch up to the present?”

Just imagining their pain put a bad taste in Matthias’s mouth. Neither he nor Laurenz could say anything.

“We cannot allow history to repeat itself,” Leonore concluded. “To that end, you must understand that simply granting the wishes of whomever you serve is not enough. Lady Rozemyne in particular is extraordinarily creative and motivated, but she does not have nearly enough stamina to keep up with herself. To complicate matters further, her warped understanding of noble culture, due in part to her upbringing in the temple, means she is often not on the same page as the rest of us.”

Matthias and Laurenz listened carefully. Roderick had told them how to serve their new lady as members of the former Veronica faction, but this was something more elementary—it was a lesson on how to serve the being that was Rozemyne.

“You must be careful about Lord Wilfried as well,” Brunhilde noted. “That boy always looks down on Lady Rozemyne.”

From there, she launched into an anger-fueled rant; it seemed that Wilfried was guilty of quite a few infuriating offenses that only retainers would notice. Each was trivial on its own, but just as an ever-growing stack of rocks would eventually form a mountain, his list of sins had created such a downward spiral that the girls serving Rozemyne were openly furious.

There have been a few occasions when he’s annoyed me as well...

Brunhilde continued, “My opinion of him improved slightly when he accepted this game of ditter, but from the halfway point of the match through to the discussion with royalty, he only seemed to care about Lady Hannelore this, Lady Hannelore that!”

“Well, uh... I think we should be a bit more considerate here,” Matthias said. “Ehrenfest only won because he got Lady Hannelore out

of her base after she was left there all alone.”

“I will take that into consideration, but Lady Rozemyne was still white as a sheet. I am furious that he had the time to worry about an archduke candidate from another duchy but not about his own fiancée as she fought to protect everyone from Ehrenfest all on her own.”

“I expect he was at least a little worried about her,” Laurenz said, trying to protect Wilfried—but Brunhilde shot him a glare so fierce that he started to wonder whether looks really could kill.



Leonore gave Brunhilde a consoling pat on the back while looking between Laurenz and Matthias. “Lord Wilfried was celebrating our victory alongside everyone else, was he not? He expressed his relief that the royal family’s interrogation ended without any unreasonable demands or complaints. Yet he offered not a word of gratitude to Lady Rozemyne, nor did he express any concern for her health, even though she maintained the shield for everybody else’s sake. His only words were that... collapsing is normal for her.”

Thinking back, that was true. Matthias had definitely been worried about Rozemyne, but even as she was carried away half-conscious in the presence of the royal family, his only thoughts had been “This always happens” and “She should wake up before long.” He inhaled sharply, having not realized just how much time had warped his perspective.

“I think that was because Lord Wilfried didn’t want to worry anyone,” Judithe said. “Even I could tell that. He can’t give detailed reports while Lady Rozemyne is asleep, and—”

“Even so,” Brunhilde said, interrupting her, “a full year has passed since their engagement. Lady Rozemyne is always working herself to death for Ehrenfest, but not once has he even deigned to prepare a get-well present for her. I am so, so frustrated with him! This is normal, he says? How can it be when this is her first time collapsing from using too many rejuvenation potions during a game of ditter? He should know better! SHOULDN’T HE?!”

Brunhilde was getting heated again, her eyes blazing with anger. It was clear how deeply she cared about her lady. Plus, if even Brunhilde, someone who usually disguised her true feelings so well, was this openly furious, one could only imagine how Hartmut would react.

I don’t even want to think about it.

Matthias quickly elected to push Hartmut from his mind and instead proposed improvements for their relationship with Wilfried.

“In that case, we could prompt Lord Wilfried to visit her by suggesting as much to his attendants.”

“A kind gesture should not need to be coerced; it is pointless unless it comes from the heart,” Leonore said, sounding no less angry than Brunhilde. “That said, while Brunhilde is rather mad about it, I am not too concerned about whether he visits her. Boys are not allowed on the third floor of the dormitory and, in a political marriage, it is best not to show your partner any weakness to begin with.”

At this sudden declaration, Matthias saw Laurenz twitch in fear.

“My issue,” she continued, “is that Lord Wilfried seems to bemoan

the interruption of our dinner game and view it as having somehow ‘soiled’ our victory. Dunkelfelger put aside all excuses and sentimentality to acknowledge their defeat, yet that boy still sought a rematch in the presence of the royal family, saying he was unsatisfied with the resolution! It is absolutely *unfathomable*.”

Leonore’s anger was so extreme that her usually indigo eyes had started to change color.

In response to her rant, Matthias gave a small nod of agreement. Wilfried always went on about not wanting to protest the decisions of others and how those at the bottom of the rankings should obey those at the top—so why, Matthias wondered, had he decided to throw all that out the window at the worst possible moment?

Leonore sighed. “The boy is a blithering fool—that, I already knew—but I thought he would *at least* have the intelligence to recognize our enemy’s strength after we had *just* faced them in battle. Does he genuinely wish to protect Lady Rozemyne? He should be using any means necessary to succeed and thanking the gods for every victory. To prioritize anything else is appalling, is it not?”

It was Laurenz who offered a response. “I mean, as a guard knight, I have to agree that our half-baked victory was kind of—”

LAURENZ, YOU FOOL! Don’t talk back to them! No! STOP!

But alas, Matthias’s internal screams did not reach his unfortunate friend. Laurenz was unable to even finish his thought before Leonore interrupted him with a calm smile.

“Laurenz, it appears you are not fit to be a guard knight. I shall consult Lord Bonifatius and have him increase the intensity of your training together.”

“Wha?” Laurenz blinked, not understanding her intentions.

Leonore looked to Judithe and said, “Judithe, state the way of the guard knight!”

“Prioritize the safety of your lord or lady above all else, no matter what!” came her sharp, crisp declaration. “Use any means necessary to protect them!” And she was far from being insincere; after she had spread her cape to protect Rozemyne from Rarstark, it was clear that she believed and practiced those words without compromise.

“Laurenz, chant those words to yourself day in and day out,” Leonore said. “Chant them until every fiber of your being knows that protecting Lady Rozemyne is far more important than the nature of one’s victory. You may have given your name, but if you cannot protect your lady without being ordered to, then you will be of no use as a guard knight.” She was wearing a smile, but her words were gravely serious and scathing enough to burn one’s ears.

Laurenz was already shrinking back from Leonore’s fury. “I apologize. I did not understand what it means to be a guard knight,”

he said. "However, Lord Wilfried is not Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, so—"

"He may not be her guard knight, but he *is* her fiancé, and their engagement is entirely for his sake. He cannot become the next aub without Lady Rozemyne by his side, and it is hard to say how much authority he will wield as an archduke candidate of the disgraced former Veronica faction now that the purge has been carried out. Do you understand that, I wonder?"

"I wonder myself..." Brunhilde agreed. "It is precisely because their marriage is political that Lord Wilfried must be especially careful about how he acts. It would have been so easy for him to gain some favor with Lady Rozemyne by gifting her a single book on her sickbed or even writing her a letter."

Through his engagement to Rozemyne, Wilfried now had the grounds to make the nobles of the Leisegang faction his allies, thereby allowing him to become the next aub. Those were the rumors, at least; Matthias couldn't remember hearing anything of the sort from within the former Veronica faction. He instinctively spoke, having noticed that their factions had contrasting interpretations of events.

"Is that how it looks to the Leisengangs? In our faction, it was said that Lord Wilfried is becoming the next aub to maintain balance now that the Lady Veronica faction has been weakened more than intended." He was merely hoping to show that there were misunderstandings to be corrected, but his efforts earned him disappointed sighs from Leonore and Brunhilde.

"My, my... How embarrassingly naive. If the nobles of the former Veronica faction truly believe that, then Lord Wilfried will never improve his attitude."

"His attitude...?" Matthias echoed.

"Even during the royal family's inquiry, Lord Wilfried obeyed the advice given to him by Oswald and stifled our opinions, forcing Ehrenfest to comply meekly with everybody else's desires," Leonore said. "And this was far from the first time, wasn't it?"

Brunhilde nodded in agreement. "He only listens to his retainers; not once has he ever considered or even asked for our opinions. Is it really so unreasonable that we want him to speak with us or with Lady Rozemyne before he responds to people...?"

Matthias swallowed hard. During the inquiry, Leonore had suggested that Ehrenfest take advantage of Dunkelfelger's request and participate in the questioning of the intruders. Matthias had been in full agreement... but Wilfried had chosen to obey Oswald and say as little as possible to those ranked above him.

Aah... I also remember being taken aback by what Lord Wilfried said, though it was for another reason than these two.

But those thoughts had been pushed from his mind until now—after all, what he had noticed after the incident the girls were referring to had been far more important. He was racking his brain, trying to remember what it was, when Judithe got between him and Leonore.

“Brunhilde, Leonore, please calm down!” she said. “You’re making Matthias and Laurenz really uncomfortable. They may have given their names, but they’re still from the former Veronica faction; it must be hard for them to endure people criticizing Lord Wilfried so openly. Right?” She was looking at the two boys expectantly... but Laurenz merely grimaced.

“Judithe, don’t make things worse for us.”

Matthias gave a half-smile. He consoled Judithe, who hadn’t quite managed to read the room, and then said, “My silence wasn’t out of discomfort; I just remembered something else about the inquiry that stood out to me.”

“Oh? Something else?” Brunhilde asked, blinking in surprise.

“Back when Lord Lestilaut stated his intention to petition the king, Lord Wilfried argued that the matter was not worth such serious action...”

Members of the Sovereign Knight’s Order had mobilized without an order from the king. As a guard knight, Matthias thought it was important to find out what had inspired their rash insubordination... yet Wilfried had outright rejected the idea. He was going to be Ehrenfest’s next archduke—was he not worried that a similar incident might arise from within his own Knight’s Order? It had felt like he was literally incapable of picturing such a serious danger.

“Also, did anyone else smell something sweet in the air?” Matthias asked. At last, he had broached his primary reason for gathering everyone in the first place.

At once, everybody fell into thought, drawn in by his serious expression.

Laurenz was the first to look up. “You’re not talking about the rinsham that girls use, right, Matthias? Whose smell caught your interest?”

“Laurenz, come on. I wouldn’t bring up such a topic at a time like this.” Matthias couldn’t tell whether Laurenz was joking or being serious, so he just silenced him and turned to the others. He made eye contact with Brunhilde next, but she shook her head.

“I did not notice anything in particular. Even if something had caught my attention at the time, I would not have remembered it unless it were especially strong.”

All of a sudden, Leonore’s head shot up. “Matthias, don’t tell me...”

Matthias caught her gaze and nodded. "It is highly likely that trug was used on the Knight's Order."

"Come again?!"

"As I went to say farewell to Prince Anastasius, I noticed a sweet, familiar scent in the air. I traced it as best I could and found that it was coming from the knights tied up on the ground. At the time, I struggled to place it... but after returning to the dormitory and seeing the fireplace, Lady Georgine's smile suddenly arose in my mind."

From there, Matthias had immediately connected the dots—but it seemed that nobody else had noticed. The thought sent a chill down his spine. Brunhilde and Judithe were both wearing stiff expressions as well.

"Through the purge, it came to our attention that trug is a dangerous plant," Leonore said. "However, none of us are familiar with its scent or the like. You are the only one who could have noticed, Matthias."

Judithe nodded. "The incense could have been burning right in front of me, and I still wouldn't have known that it was trug... It really is dangerous."

"The fireplace being lit during that summer party was a cause for alarm, but during this season... burning trug would be simple, wouldn't it?" Laurenz asked.

Matthias nodded. At this time of year, a person could easily burn trug without anyone suspecting a thing.

"I know very little about it myself," Leonore said. "I can only hope the Sovereign nobles investigating those three knights will notice."

After hearing her harsh words for the former Veronica faction, Matthias had assumed that Leonore would immediately doubt him, but she was actually trusting his opinion. The discussion proceeded as if everyone accepted that trug had been used on the Sovereign knights.

"I should note that I'm not entirely sure of my assertion," Matthias clarified. "I might be mistaken." Really, he hoped that he was; the very thought of trug having been used on the Sovereign Knight's Order was nightmarish.

However, Leonore was far more pragmatic. "In the past, Lady Georgine used trug as part of a scheme to harm Lady Rozemyne. This time, it was used to interrupt a game of ditter during which Lady Rozemyne's engagement was on the line. It would not be unreasonable to assume that there is something connecting two mutual opponents of our lady."

Rather than being concerned for the sake of the Knight's Order, Leonore was focused on how the trug was being used in relation to Rozemyne. Matthias realized then that her perspective was completely

different from his own. Maybe such an extreme sensitivity to danger was needed to be a guard knight.

“You were right not to mention the trug then and there, Matthias; Dunkelfelger or the royal family might have begun to suspect that Ehrenfest was responsible. We cannot take action without our lady, so for now, let us wait for her to awaken and recover.”

Matthias nodded. Leonore, Lady Rozemyne’s head guard knight in the Royal Academy, was fully focused on granting her lady’s wishes—but her approach was entirely her own.

Awakening and Reports

Upon opening my eyes, the first person I saw was Rihyarda, looking at me with an incredibly relieved expression.

“Milady, how are you feeling?” she asked, helping me to sit up. “If you want something to eat, I shall have food prepared at once.”

I drank some of the water she offered me, then lay back down. My head was still fuzzy from my fever, and I didn’t have an appetite.

“I truly am relieved,” she continued. “It was trying on my heart knowing that I could only wait for you to awaken. This time, we were unable to even aid you with rejuvenation potions.”

My fever had apparently skyrocketed while I was unconscious, sending my helpless attendants into a nervous panic. But even then, there were traces around my bed that they had done whatever they could to cool me down.

“Rihyarda, I apologize for worrying you,” I said.

“Next time, no matter what happens, please do not drink more potions than you have been prescribed.”

I tried to nod in response, but I wasn’t sure whether I actually managed to. A pleasant feeling like cold water spread through my body, and my eyes slowly drooped shut again.

The next time I awoke, someone was holding my hand. I supposed that it was probably Rihyarda. My whole body was still too heavy for me to move right away, so I settled for turning my head. As I did, I realized that it wasn’t Rihyarda holding my hand but Brunhilde.

She was kneeling by my bedside, looking down at me with pain and regret clear on her face. It was rare to see her express her emotions so openly, since she was a very proper noble.

I blinked as best I could and said, “I’m fine,” hoping to see the same look of relief that Rihyarda had given me. But her expression remained unchanged; instead, she screwed her eyes tightly shut and began to apologize.

“Lady Rozemyne, I am truly sorry. This is my fault. Had I not fainted during our ditter game, this would not have happened. I am a failure of an attendant for not having stopped you from drinking an excess of rejuvenation potions.”

I certainly hadn’t expected Brunhilde to feel this responsible for my rejuvenation potion antics. At the time, my only focus had been

winning the game at all costs.

It took all of my energy, but I managed to turn my head to meet Brunhilde's gaze. "No, this is not your fault," I said to her. "I was the one who determined that the potions were necessary."

"Perhaps, but it was my duty to prioritize your health above all else and stop you. I lost consciousness at a critical moment and failed to carry out my duty as an attendant."

By that logic, it was my fault for having asked Brunhilde to participate in our ditter game in the first place. She had a considerable amount of mana, but she had never been trained for combat.

"I will say it as many times as it takes: this is not your fault, Brunhilde. I drank them simply because I did not wish to lose."

Brunhilde tried to protest, still unconvinced, but Lieseleta pulled the bed curtain aside before she could. "Brunhilde, do leave it at that," she said as she came to join us. "I understand your feelings of regret, but you are going to tire Lady Rozemyne out when she has only now awoken."

That was enough to snap Brunhilde back to reality. She let go of my hand and stood, shutting off her emotions once again. There was likely still a storm of regrets raging in her heart, but she didn't allow it to show. After helping me drink some water, she used waschen to clean the sweat off my body.

"Brunhilde, you are an excellent attendant," I said. "I do not consider you a failure at all. Rather, I am more concerned that my own failures have put a black mark on your work record."

"A black mark? Not at all. This is simply a personal regret of mine. That said... please do avoid drinking too many potions going forward."

I promised at once. The last thing I wanted was for my retainers to look as haggard with worry as Brunhilde did now. But as that thought crossed my mind, my consciousness faded again.

Even after my mind cleared, I was made to stay in bed until my fever disappeared completely. That much was the standard routine, but I could tell that I really had worried everyone; they were a lot more active than usual. I accepted their warnings and care without being selfish about wanting to read books.

One day, Lieseleta brought me a stuffed shumil. It had navy fur, golden eyes, and a feystone on its stomach.

"What do you think, Lady Rozemyne?" she asked. "She ended up quite adorable, in my honest opinion."

"She's wonderful, Lieseleta!"

It was the stuffed toy and sound-recording magic tool that Raimund had designed, which I intended to fill with messages for

Ferdinand. Personally, I'd wanted the toy to be a red panda like Lessy, but I'd ended up caving to Lieseleta's overwhelming love of shumils. I'd entrusted her with making it, since I didn't have any time to spare, but I'd never expected her to finish it so quickly.

I hugged the stuffed shumil while lying on my side. It was the perfect size and just soft enough for hugging. The face was cute as well, and I could feel all the love that Lieseleta had poured into it.

"This must be the sound-recording feystone," I said, touching the feystone on the navy plush's stomach. I registered my mana with it, then immediately got to work recording some messages.

"Ferdinand, are you resting properly? Do be reasonable with your workload."

"No matter how busy you are, you won't have the strength to work if you don't eat. And don't just rely on potions. You need food as well."

Once I was done, I checked to see whether the shumil repeated my messages properly. It did. Amazing. This would definitely ensure that Ferdinand maintained a healthy lifestyle even in Ahrensbach.

Oh, who am I kidding? He'll never use this.

Back in the temple, whenever his attendants or I had spoken to him, he had almost always said, "Cease interrupting me."

"Ferdinand would just throw this in a box, never to be seen again," I mused aloud, staring down at the shumil. "Maybe I should gift it to Justus instead so that he can bring it out when necessary..."

As I continued to ponder, Philine came in with several letters. "Lady Rozemyne, letters from Ehrenfest and Lady Letizia of Ahrensbach have arrived. It would be best to read them before the Interduchy Tournament."

Lieseleta and Brunhilde stepped back, allowing her to approach my bedside.

Philine smiled as she handed me the letters; as an apprentice scholar, it was her duty to have checked the contents before giving them to me. "This letter appears to be one of the tasks that Lord Ferdinand set for Lady Letizia."

Apparently, it was important for young nobles to practice sending letters to other duchies through the border gates rather than straight to their intended recipient. Letizia's aim was to successfully convey her position while at the same time accounting for the nobles of opposing factions within her own duchy, the border guards, and the nobles from the other duchy who would read it.

Huh. Neat. So normal archduke candidates do tasks like this before entering the Royal Academy.

I probably would have done the same, had I not ended up asleep in a jureve. No doubt I would have learned any number of noble

phrases and exchanges in the process.

"This letter seems to be a task for you as well," Philine continued. "It says here that you need to send a response that will serve as an example to Lady Letizia, using all the phrasing expected of a noble."

"Oh no, Philine. I seem to have developed a fever."

I'm still unwell, so giving me a task from Ferdinand is just plain cruel. He even told me to use proper noble phrasing—my worst enemy!

I appreciated that Ferdinand was trying to educate us both at once, but my sheer displeasure was clear as day. My retainers giggled at the sight of me agonizing over this unexpected task.

"I believe your response to Lady Letizia can wait until this academic term has ended," Lieseleta said.

"Oh my. But if she intends to deliver it to Lord Ferdinand during this year's graduation, is sooner not better?" Brunhilde replied. "He will be attending to escort his fiancée, after all."

My retainers, whose faces had previously looked drawn out of regret and concern for my health, were now smiling and bantering with each other. It was so nice to see, I thought, as I took and opened my first letter from Letizia. I made sure to savor the crinkling of the paper and the scent of the ink before beginning to read.

"I will read this first, to finish this task from Ferdinand as soon as possible," I said. "Let's see here..."

"By the time you read this, Lady Rozemyne, will the Royal Academy term have ended already? Lord Ferdinand recently mentioned during one of our tutoring sessions that you finished your classes early. He says it is only a matter of time before you collapse from ill health, but I hope that does not happen. My wish is that you are doing well. From what I am told, you are an excellent student indeed. I, myself, am spending my days studying and working on the tasks that Lord Ferdinand gives me."

The letter was normal up until that point—but everything after was filled with so many allusions to the gods that I couldn't keep my brow from furrowing.

"She says here that Ferdinand's teachings follow the direction of... Erwachlehen? That's the God of Guidance, I think. He's involved with those who educate others, like teachers and instructors, but what does she mean exactly? Considered alongside this line about Verdrenna's visit changing the seasons, maybe she means to say that she's thankful for her new learning environment under Ferdinand. So is she indirectly bragging about how good a teacher she has? But, no... this bit about the winter subordinate gods can also be interpreted as her *struggling* with the change..."

Before I knew it, Rihyarda had come to my side. "Milady, let us read it together," she said. "A response founded in misunderstandings would be quite disastrous."

“...Please and thank you.”

I had zero confidence in my reading comprehension, so I accepted Rihyarda’s offer without a moment’s hesitation. For some reason, I just couldn’t seem to grasp the proper meaning of the ambiguous, context-heavy writing patterns that nobles used. During conversations, I could at least make an educated guess based on the other person’s tone and expression, but that wasn’t possible through text alone.

After rereading the passage with help from Rihyarda and Brunhilde, it became clear that Letizia considered Ferdinand an exceptionally skilled individual and a talented instructor. She thought I was very impressive for having been able to keep up with his teachings—but she was troubled that he expected her to meet the same standards. The one thing consoling her amid the intense education was my sweets; she included her thanks for them.

Oh no... This is a letter about how Ferdinand is way too demanding!

Letizia was practically begging to know how I’d survived Ferdinand piling me with one backbreaking task after another and giving me his nerve-rackingly harsh glare. I had nothing but sympathy for her.

I know how you feel. Oh, how I know. Ferdinand always gives work by the truckload. And every task is hard. I could put my all into the ones that involved reading, but everything else was such a pain. I just wanted to toss them all aside.

Helping out Letizia felt like the right thing to do. After all, I had promised to give Ferdinand a talking-to if he started being too strict.

“Brunhilde, summon Lieseleta,” I said.

Upon her arrival, I asked her to make another stuffed shumil.

“According to this letter,” I continued, “Lady Letizia is struggling to endure the intensity of Ferdinand’s training. We need to give her a few words to stop him.”

I started thinking about what message to record on the shumil. “Do not be too harsh when speaking” would do, or perhaps “I would like some praise when I do well.” Maybe “I hope you will praise me for working hard today”? Surely any of those would make Ferdinand realize he was being too demanding.

“Before I reply to Lady Letizia, can I go into my hidden room and read my letter from Ferdinand?” I asked. My retainers had softened up and seemed more lively again, so I tried to climb out of bed.

Instantly, Rihyarda put on a forceful smile. “Milady, you should wait until your fever has gone completely.”

Lieseleta nodded. “We would have you prioritize your health for now, Lady Rozemyne. Your male retainers cannot visit you here and have been worried this entire time.”

In the end, it wasn't until three days after our game of bride-taking ditler that I was able to get out of bed.

"Are you truly well...?" I was asked. "You can rest more if you would like."

"My fever has gone down, and I am eager to eat normal food. Furthermore, while you all seem intent on hiding it, there are important reports for me to listen to regarding the ditler game and the royal family, are there not?"

I went to the dining hall and ate with everyone to show that I was healthy again, then went with my retainers to a meeting room to receive their reports. Wilfried, Charlotte, and their retainers followed.

"Ehrenfest proclaimed the match to be null and void due to the sudden interruption, but Dunkelfelger refused, arguing that the judge did not issue a cease-fire," Wilfried explained. "They say the match ended the moment Lady Hannelore left their base for the safety of your shield. I hate that, though; it makes it seem like I tricked her." His arms were crossed in an obvious show of displeasure—but I didn't share his feelings at all.

"If those from Dunkelfelger believe they lost, then all the better; Ehrenfest would not be able to endure a rematch. However, I do agree that our victory was not entirely sound. I suggest we drop all this about Lady Hannelore marrying into Ehrenfest and get them to agree to stop fighting our engagement in return."

Wilfried appeared to brighten in an instant. "Right. That would be fitting. Lord Lestilaut said all that stuff about ditler being divine and that they would honor our agreement no matter what, but the aubs can negotiate the terms during the Interduchy Tournament."

Negotiating with a ditler-obsessed duchy like Dunkelfelger sounded annoying if nothing else, but since we had won our game against them, everything would probably turn out alright.

"Also," Wilfried continued, "Prince Anastasius gave us a few choice words about not letting this kind of thing happen again. He said that the next time it does, the royal family will take you for themselves. Basically, he... feels I'm not capable of protecting you."

"Excuse me...?"

Wilfried was slumping his shoulders, looking dejected, but I didn't have a clue why the royal family were involving themselves in the first place. I looked around for an explanation and eventually locked eyes with Charlotte.

"Sister, we received a report from the Sovereignty while you were asleep. As it turns out, Prince Hildebrand mentioned our ditler game to the Sovereign Knight's Order."

Hildebrand had apparently revealed that Dunkelfelger was trying to steal "the Saint of Ehrenfest," even though my engagement had

already been approved by the king. Anastasius had admonished him for this, maintaining that the royal family was in no position to interfere. My engagement had received the king's permission, but it wasn't the result of a royal decree; in other words, it was a matter to be decided between aubs.

"So did Prince Hildebrand order them to interfere...?" I asked. Perhaps my conversation with Hannelore in the underground archive had been the catalyst for all of this madness.

"No," Charlotte replied. "The Sovereign Knight's Order admonished him when he spoke to them and made no attempt to involve themselves—his retainers and several of the Royal Academy's professors confirmed that. Furthermore, Prince Hildebrand had never even met the knights who intruded on our game. He was still presumably to blame for them having learned about it, though, so he received a scolding from Prince Anastasius nonetheless."

That only confirmed my suspicions. "In other words, Lady Hannelore and I are partially to blame as well for discussing the game near him." It was scary how even the smallest exchange or attempt to carry out justice could cause such a huge incident.

I sighed. "The more time passes, the less I want anything to do with the royal family. Why would they try to take me in? I'm just a troublemaker causing them problems." It didn't make sense, especially when Anastasius lectured me so much whenever I went to his villa.

"The king was there for the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual, remember," Charlotte said. "If they think Ehrenfest is prepared to send you to another duchy, then they would rather take you for themselves."

But it wasn't easy for the royal family to intervene, no matter how much they wanted me to join them. Direct interference—like sending the Sovereign Knight's Order to keep Dunkelfelger from winning my hand in marriage—was out of the question and would only make them appear entirely untrustworthy. On top of that, they had already sent Ferdinand to Ahrensbach by royal decree; reducing the size of Ehrenfest's archducal family any further would risk impacting our foundation.

With these factors in mind, the royal family was holding back on claiming me—at least for now.

"They made it very clear that we won't get any more chances," Wilfried said, still dour. "If we cause another fuss like this in the Royal Academy, they *will* take you."

He wasn't the only one feeling depressed about having failed to protect me; my retainers were the same. I'd already woken up to them expressing their regret at how things had turned out and bemoaning all the things they could have done instead.

“Let us simply be glad that they have spared us this time and resolve not to cause a fuss again,” I said. “More importantly, what happened to the knights and students who interrupted our game?”

Wilfried straightened his back and put on a serious face. “As they believed they were carrying out the will of the Zent, the students are going unquestioned. Professor Rauffen really broke his back for them. The Sovereign knights who riled them up and joined the attack will receive a harsh punishment from the king himself, since they falsely used his name. He thought of them as loyal vassals before, so his wrath and disappointment are extreme, apparently.”

“It seems odd to me that such loyal knights would suddenly start acting of their own accord...” I said, and it was then that Matthias raised a hand, seeking my permission to speak. I granted it.

Matthias prefaced that he didn’t have any concrete evidence to prove what he was about to reveal and then said, “It is possible that trug was used on them.”

“Wait, do you mean... that stuff?!”

As I recalled, trug was a plant that could be used to disturb memories and create hallucinations. It was the same thing the Georgine faction had used during their meetings.

“I noticed a sweet scent coming from the restrained knights when I approached Prince Anastasius to say my farewells. At the time, I couldn’t quite pinpoint why the smell seemed familiar, but it came back to me when I returned to the dormitory and saw the fireplace. There is a chance I am mistaken, though, as I did not smell it carefully.”

“But you must be fairly confident to have decided to tell me,” I said. Matthias was always conservative; he wouldn’t have spoken unless he had given the situation a lot of thought and come to a conclusion that he believed in.

“We would have a better idea if we could observe their memories.”

Indeed, if their memories were distorted, then it was likely that the three knights had been manipulated by someone else. Would the royal family be able to work that out during their questioning? Or was this something we should tell them?

“Is trug common in the Royal Academy and the Sovereignty?” I asked.

“Not at all,” replied one of Charlotte’s apprentice scholars, all of whom were taking an apothecary class. “If it were, then everyone would recognize it as a dangerous substance. I expect it is a specialty plant unique to one duchy.”

That made sense; the royal family and Sovereign nobles wouldn’t necessarily know about every single specialty plant from every single

duchy.

“We should ask Aub Ehrenfest for his permission before we inform the royal family that trug might have been used,” I said.

A feeling of unease stirred in my chest. Was it really a coincidence that we were encountering trug again, and so soon after the previous incident? Maybe one of Georgine’s connections was in a position that allowed them to manipulate the knights of the Sovereign Knight’s Order. If so, then perhaps Georgine would find it much easier to return to Ehrenfest than any of us expected.

I reached up and touched the rainbow feystones dangling from my hair stick, and my heart started to beat faster.

Preparing for the Interduchy Tournament

The very thought of Georgine being connected to someone in the Sovereignty filled me with unease, but Leonore gave me a smile. “Lady Rozemyne, I can understand your nervousness,” she said, “but this is a matter for the aub to deal with. Your focus should be the upcoming Interduchy Tournament, should it not? It crept much closer while you were bedridden.”

Brunhilde nodded. “Indeed. The Dedication Ritual has afforded us a connection to the Zent himself, and we are engaged in joint research with three greater duchies. We are sure to have more visitors than last year, which means our preparations are going to be even more arduous.”

“They’re right,” Wilfried added. “Let’s leave the trug incident to Father and focus on getting ready for the Interduchy Tournament. How’s the research with Ahrensbach going?”

They were all making an excellent point; I needed to focus on what was right in front of me. To that end, I did my best to change my mindset.

“Our joint research with Ahrensbach will resume once I read the letters that arrived and Rihyarda permits me to leave the dormitory,” I said. “For the most part, Ahrensbach is going to be presenting our findings, so there won’t actually be much for me to do.”

Included alongside my letter from Letizia was one from Ferdinand regarding our joint research. I wanted to go to my hidden room and read the parts written in invisible ink as soon as possible, but I still couldn’t risk getting too excited, so I was being made to wait until my health was back to normal.

“Speaking of which, how is our joint research with Drewanchel going?” I asked.

Wilfried provided an answer: “We’ve settled on what we’re going to present. First is how to improve the quality and attributes of Ehrenfest fey paper, and second is how we’ve been using it.”

“Also,” Charlotte interjected, “when it comes to using fey paper as magic tools and the like, we have decided that each duchy will present its own discoveries.”

This agreement with Drewanchel sounded very similar to our agreement with Dunkelfelger—an understandable outcome, since

Wilfried had participated in our meeting with the latter before leading talks with the former. Presenting our own findings was advisable because it prevented the higher-ranking duchy from taking all the credit for itself.

“It’s good that we’ve managed to avoid Drewanchel publishing everything themselves,” I said. “So, what ideas did we actually come up with? I don’t remember receiving any reports.” My first instinct was to look to Marianne, to whom I had suggested self-playing instruments, but she quickly averted her gaze.

“Drewanchel started working on instruments that play themselves,” she confessed. “We tried researching them ourselves, but we could not make anywhere near as much progress.”

In other words, Drewanchel had ended up stealing the idea. Marianne and Ignaz both slumped their shoulders as they revealed that all of our research was inferior to that of our collaborator.

Ignaz continued, “You granted us such a valuable opportunity to collaborate with a greater duchy, Lady Rozemyne, yet our results were subpar. We apologize.”

“Sister, please do not rebuke them too much,” Charlotte said, coming to their defense. “This is their first time doing research with a greater duchy, and they did their best. It is simply the case that Drewanchel did better.”

“Rebuke them?” I shook my head. “The thought did not even cross my mind.”

My only aim had been to increase the quality of our fey paper and the value of paper made in Ehrenfest. As long as we had *something* to present, I didn’t see an issue.

“Still,” I said, “it would be a shame if we had *no* notable discoveries to draw attention to ourselves. Let us focus on making books that automatically return to their shelves. Improve the quality of nanseb paper as much as you can. All we need to do is create moving books; we already have the magic circles needed to complete the process from there.”

Combining nanseb paper with the magic circle that Raimund had devised would surely be enough to produce movable versions of the light, thin books made in Ehrenfest, if not also the thicker ones used in other duchies. Creating a demonstration of the books returning to their shelves would surely turn a lot of heads during the Interduchy Tournament.

“Moving on...” I continued. “If we assume that Drewanchel is intent on making its self-playing instruments out of the best paper available, then perhaps we could make ours more accessible. Our magic tools should require so little mana that even commoners will be able to use them.”

Even commoners could get their hands on low-quality feystones thanks to the feystone stores in the lower city—and if we could produce something similar to a music box, then it would even be possible to have music playing in places like the Italian restaurant, which were generally too high-class for wandering minstrels who came and went like the wind. Perhaps we could have visiting customers buy feystones and select their own songs like a jukebox; that way, the Italian restaurant would be able to provide music without needing to open its pockets.

We could technically make music boxes without relying on magic, but, well... I think Johann would die if I ordered one now.

Johann was currently spending more than half of each year in other provinces, teaching craftspeople how to make printing presses and metal letter types. Maybe I would ask him to make a music box when his workload started to relax, but spreading the printing industry was still a lot more important in my eyes.

“We could combine sheet music with feystones that even commoners are able to use,” I mused. “In an ideal world, one low-quality feystone would play one or two songs.” I was casually listing off one idea after another, like I did when speaking with Raimund or Zack, but Wilfried quickly raised a hand to stop me.

“Rozemyne, this is too much for them,” he said. “You’re being too abrupt.”

On closer inspection, Marianne and Ignaz were looking a little queasy. But, well... I was an entire year below them. All these ideas had come to me with relative ease, so two fourth-year apprentice archscholars were sure to breeze through their new assignment. At least, that was my assumption.

I instinctively turned to my own apprentice scholars. “This is straightforward enough, right? You can minimize the mana cost by using a simple magic circle alongside some supplementary circles, and we already know that sound will play if you run a feystone across sheet music.”

Roderick and Philine had been making notes on their diptychs, but they both fell into thought when they met my gaze.

“As you said, Raimund has already designed the magic circles, right?” Roderick asked. “In that case, although the task ahead may *seem* complicated due to the involvement of commoners, it would actually be rather easy to realize.”

“Perhaps we could write the sheet music with better quality ink to make the feystones more efficient,” Philine added. Both she and Roderick had observed Raimund and me in Hirschur’s laboratory, so they were positively brimming with suggestions.

Marianne and Ignaz exchanged anxious looks when they saw how

easily my apprentice scholars were coming up with solutions, but they ultimately faced me and said, “We can do this.” If they were successful, then our joint research with Drewanchel wouldn’t appear entirely one-sided. I was looking forward to seeing their results.

“Sister, how is our joint research with Dunkelfelger progressing?” Charlotte asked. “It seems that your scholars made progress while you were asleep.”

Philine and Muriella stepped forward, whereupon Philine announced, “We have finished organizing the results of Dunkelfelger’s part of the research. All that remains is Ehrenfest’s ritual. We intend to include the thoughts and impressions of those who attended the ceremony—thoughts and impressions that you so graciously gathered for us during tea parties, Lady Charlotte. We also found out yesterday that an apprentice archscholar who participated in our research ended up receiving the divine protection of a subordinate god. This information has since been worked into our results.”

“An archscholar who received divine protection *after* the Dedication Ritual...?” Charlotte asked, surprised. “Can you give me their name?”

Muriella smiled. “Lady Lueuradi of Jossbrenner. As far as I am aware, she was the only third-year who participated in the Dedication Ritual without having performed the ritual for obtaining divine blessings. She took the advice of others and prayed nonstop in the run-up to her final exams.”

Archnobles were relatively quick studies, so everyone who had participated in the Dedication Ritual had already finished their classes—that is, with the exception of Lueuradi, an apprentice archscholar. She had yet to take her final exam by the time of the ceremony and prayed until the very last moment.

“Lady Lueuradi seems to have taken inspiration from the Drewanchel students, as she made a charm and prayed to it sincerely. Her focus was... Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts.”

“That is quite a rare goddess to pray to...” I said. “Lady Lueuradi is a scholar, so I would have assumed she would pray to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, as those from Drewanchel do.”

Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts appeared extremely often in Elvira’s love stories, but she seemed too minor to dedicate a charm to.

Muriella smiled again, this time appearing especially amused. “She prayed from the bottom of her heart to encounter more wondrous love stories.”

She prayed for more stories, not for her own romance to blossom?

I suddenly felt some kinship with this Lueuradi. Like me, she must have been a failure at life who valued books more than reality.

“Perhaps she prayed faithfully—or obsessively—for her own

desires,” I pondered. “Or maybe, because she’s an archnoble, she was able to pour a lot of mana into her charm. She might even have an affinity for Water. In any case, Lady Lueuradi obtained the divine protection of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts in no time at all. I consider these results wonderful.”

Lueuradi was proof that even archnobles of other duchies could obtain divine protections by offering their mana and praying diligently. We would need to find out more from her and add the details to our findings.

Muriella nodded. “Those who know Lueuradi apparently wish she would have obtained divine protections from other gods, but the individual herself seems very satisfied with the outcome. She even joyously stated that she wishes to thank you in person, Lady Rozemyne.”

I was getting the impression that Lueuradi was probably a bit weird in the head, but all bookworms were good people by default. She was bound to be lovely and sweet. We had only spoken briefly during our tea party together, so I didn’t remember her face, but I *did* remember the book she had allowed me to borrow—it was a love story written in ancient language that featured even more gods than Elvira’s own tales of romance. It had been extremely difficult to comprehend, since the actual events had been indistinguishable from the metaphors.

Lueuradi must love romance stories to the very core. She would get along well with Muriella...

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than I quickly corrected myself—they were presumably close friends already. That was why Muriella had been the only one privy to her new divine protection.

“Lady Rozemyne, may we lend Lady Lueuradi the new volume of *Royal Academy Love Stories* to thank her for aiding our research?” Muriella asked, her voice quavering a little.

Now that I thought about it, Lueuradi hadn’t received the latest installment of *Royal Academy Love Stories* during our most recent tea party together; we had needed to prioritize archduke candidates of top-ranking duchies, while she was only an archnoble of a middle-ranking duchy. She was presumably dying to get her hands on a copy.

I understood the allure of a new volume all too well—and how exciting it was to read one with your friends and share your thoughts with them. That kind of thing had been so common back on Earth, so it was weird to think that it was rare here.

I could already imagine Muriella and Lueuradi pressed shoulder to shoulder as they read the new release together, sharing the occasional giggle. A warm, fuzzy feeling soon spread through my chest. As the

person who had brought these books into the world to begin with, nothing made me happier.

“We are going to be asking Lueuradi to help us while her duchy is busy preparing for the Interduchy Tournament,” I said. “Of course you may lend her the new volume. I am sure she will feel Bluanfah’s divine protection while she reads it.”

Once our discussion about our joint research projects reached its natural conclusion, we decided to have Wilfried write a letter of questions regarding trug. I then returned to my room.

“Philine, please bring me my letter from Ferdinand.”

I can’t believe he’s making me do annoying homework like writing a response in noble parlance when I’m already busy preparing for the Interduchy Tournament.

I puffed out my cheeks a little, but it wasn’t every day that I received a letter from Ferdinand, so I was still excited to read it. Philine had read me the part written in normal ink when I was unwell and unable to go to my hidden room, so I already knew what that half said. He had instructed us on how to use graphs for our research presentation, repeated the instructions he had given Raimund, and detailed his plans from the Interduchy Tournament until the graduation ceremony. His intention was to spend the night of the tournament in Ehrenfest’s tea party room.

“Rihyarda, we have permission from the aub to use our tea party room, right?” I asked while Philine was off retrieving the letter. Ferdinand was going to be staying with Justus, Eckhart, and one of his Ahrensbach retainers.

“The letter was inspected at Ehrenfest, and the aub gave his permission then,” she replied. “Lord Sylvester would have rather given them a room in the dormitory, but that will not do when Lord Ferdinand is bringing an Ahrensbach retainer. We are busy preparing benches for them instead.”

Ferdinand was caught in an awkward position: he lived in Ahrensbach, but as he was not yet married, he was still technically an Ehrenfest citizen. Thus, Detlinde had instructed him to stay in the Ehrenfest Dormitory.

Though that wasn’t the real reason... The truth is, Detlinde heard about Mother’s Royal Academy Love Stories and was enraptured by the thought of her escort arriving at her dormitory on the morning of the graduation ceremony to sweep her away.

Ahrensbach’s nobles had protested—Ferdinand was already involved in their administrative work, so they feared that he might leak information to us—but Detlinde had flashed her engagement feystone and obstinately stood her ground. “Lord Ferdinand promised to grant my wishes, did he not?” she had argued.

“I more than welcome Ferdinand getting a chance to spend time here,” I said, “but I can’t imagine he’ll get much rest sleeping on a bench in our tea party room...”

Rihyarda shook her head. “This is the only way we can quash Ahrensbach’s suspicions that he might leak information. Anything else would risk worsening his position there.”

Indeed, our tea party room was the only place where his Ahrensbach retainer could accompany him. If those plans had fallen through, then Ferdinand would have had to spend the night in Hirschur’s laboratory—an outcome he had written he was glad to have avoided.

Yeah... They absolutely would have stayed up all night discussing research. Ferdinand might even have forgotten about the graduation ceremony entirely.

“Is there anything they need other than benches?” I asked. “I want to make things as comfortable for Ferdinand as possible.”

As I considered our options, Rihyarda gave a wry smile. “They will need separating screens and boxes for their luggage, but you can leave such preparations to their attendants. More importantly, milady... when you write your response to Lord Ferdinand, do not forget to mention that he should bring the time-stopping box. We will get the castle chefs to bring him food to take back to Ahrensbach.”

I noticed that she seemed more motivated than usual—perhaps because this was a rare opportunity for her to see her son, Justus. She was going to be carrying out these preparations alongside the other adult attendants accompanying our students, since the rest of us were busy getting ready for the Interduchy Tournament.

“Lady Rozemyne, here is the letter you requested,” Philine said upon her return.

“Philine, everyone, prepare for our research presentation,” I said. “I will be spending some time in my hidden room.”

“Understood. I will do my best to learn our graphs.”

According to Ferdinand, our use of graphs was going to be as revolutionary as I expected. He even predicted that we would receive many questions about them. Of course, it was down to the apprentice scholars giving the presentation to provide any answers—as an archduke candidate, I needed to prioritize socializing instead. For that reason, Ferdinand had made one thing particularly clear:

“I do not mind you using these graphs. However, venture no further than what your apprentice scholars can fully understand.”

Apparently, it was possible that our graphs might receive more attention than our actual research.

Though I doubt that, since the royal family participated in our ritual.

With that in mind, I took the letter into my hidden room and

reread the section on the front, despite Philine having told me what it said once already. Ferdinand had written a lot about our joint research with Ahrensbach; it had taken quite a while, but the report we had given to Fraularm had finally reached him.

But he's more focused on what we discovered about Schwartz and Weiss than on our actual research.

He was evidently starved for research, but there wasn't much I could say in response to his questions; I was leaving all the Schwartz and Weiss stuff to Hirschur. I made a mental note to go to her laboratory once Rihyarda permitted me to leave the dormitory. From there, I would find out exactly what Ferdinand wanted to know.

I turned my attention to the part of the letter written in shining ink.

"You guided the royal family to the underground archive, I assume? And you did not enter yourself, correct? Furthermore, how is your joint research with Dunkelfelger and Drewanchel going? Your letters stopped arriving all of a sudden. Do not tell me something happened that you dare not report."

I could already imagine Ferdinand tapping a finger against his temple.

Oh no...

Now that I thought about it, I *had* stopped sending letters around the time I guided the royal family to the archive. What had started as something so small was escalating by the day, and now I found myself unsure of what to write at all.

Though I was also not writing to him because I didn't want to get yelled at.

"Hmm... Should I send an honest response now and face his fury at the Interduchy Tournament, or wait until the Interduchy Tournament to explain and face his fury then...? Wow, talk about an illusion of choice... Both paths lead to exactly the same outcome. I guess I'll start by writing what's most likely to earn his praise."

My aim was to focus my letter on all the things that would warrant his praise. Then, at the Interduchy Tournament, I would explain the events sure to earn me a scolding. It was the only way to avoid him complaining from the very start of our reunion to the end.

For the non-shining portion of the letter, I stuck to harmless events that were already widely known: that we had donated mana to the royal family during the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual, that I now knew how to use two schtappes at once, that I'd worked my hardest during our ditter match against Dunkelfelger, and so on. I also noted what I wanted him to bring on the day of the Interduchy Tournament, as Rihyarda had suggested.

"That should do it," I eventually said. "None of this will get me

yelled at, right? Yeah, I think I'm safe."

My response to Letizia was a simple, formal letter, meaning it would go through the proper channels in Ehrenfest. But my response to Ferdinand needed to be delivered speedily through Raimund, since it had to do with the upcoming Interduchy Tournament.

Actually... this is good timing.

After all, I was already planning to go to the Hirschur Laboratory tomorrow. There, I would meet with Raimund to discuss our upcoming research publication and retrieve the book containing research on Schwartz and Weiss.

"Not many days left. I need to hurry."

Raimund's Research and Hirschur's Warning

We sent our list of trug-related questions to Ehrenfest that same evening and received a response the very next morning. Evidently, this was a matter of great importance.

"Wilfried, what does it say?" I asked.

"Corresponding with the royal family is the job of an aub; stop sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Any letters you send will also go through plenty of checks, so you might end up leaking sensitive information to the very person who used the trug.' It also says, 'I can't entrust this matter to you lot when I don't know how much of our duchy's internals you'll reveal to the world.'"

That was fair enough. Trug was already familiar to some of the adult scholars in Ehrenfest, and it was likely that Sovereign scholars of the same generation would know even more about it.

"Most importantly," Wilfried continued, "if trug really was used on Sovereign knights, then that means there's a dangerous individual either within the Sovereign Knight's Order or in the Sovereignty in general. Father doesn't want us getting involved in something so dangerous. He said that he'll discuss it with the royal family directly, since he already needs to speak with them about you performing the Starbind Ceremony."

I nodded, resolved to leave all the trug business to Sylvester. If anyone asked us how we had found out about trug ourselves, then we wouldn't be able to avoid mentioning Georgine. We hadn't yet received a complete update on the winter purge, though, so we didn't know what was safe to discuss. It was better to let him deal with things than give it a go ourselves and ultimately get yelled at.

"This letter can basically be summarized as 'don't get involved in this mess' written in a hundred different ways. Be careful, Rozemyne."

"I will. My only plans for today are going to Professor Hirschur's laboratory and checking over our joint research with Ahrensbach."

"Right. I'm going to be helping with our research with Drewanchel. Apparently, when it comes to improving the quality of our paper, we want as much mana as we can get."

And so, I went to the Hirschur Laboratory with my letter for Ferdinand in hand. Lieseleta, Gretia, Theodore, and Laurenz were accompanying me; everyone else was swamped with work preparing

for the Interduchy Tournament. Brunhilde was a central figure among the apprentice attendants, and the apprentice scholars were up to their elbows working on our joint research projects with Drewanchel and Dunkelfelger. Rihyarda was busy rushing around, maintaining communication with Ehrenfest, and preparing to welcome Ferdinand.

“Matthias is spending today in the library with Leonore, researching fey creatures,” Laurenz explained. “It was only thanks to her knowledge that we were able to win last year. Meanwhile, Judithe is practicing long-range attacks, since her degree of accuracy can completely change the battlefield.”

Theodore nodded in response, a proud smile playing on his lips. Everyone was working hard, so I needed to do my best too.

“Is Professor Hirschur here?” Lieseleta asked, announcing our arrival.

Raimund came out to welcome us, frantically rubbing down his messy black hair. He probably wasn’t getting out much, now that the Interduchy Tournament was right around the corner. “My sincerest apologies, but I must ask you to wait a moment,” he said. “We are in the process of cleaning up.” The entire time, his eyes were locked on the cart behind me. He reminded me of an animal at feeding time.

Raimund shut the door again, at which point Lieseleta giggled. “We sent them ordonnanzes last night *and* this morning reminding them of your visit, but I see they are still not ready.”

Not surprising. They had probably prioritized their research last night and only hastily started cleaning upon receiving the second ordonnanz this morning.

By the time the door opened again, Raimund and Hirschur were both fully presentable. I stepped into the laboratory, and promptly asked Raimund for an update.

“Raimund, I received a letter from Ferdinand. How is your research going?”

“I was permitted to present our tools for recording sound and for the library. If possible, I would also like you to create something else for me.”

On top of the magic tool that shone at a specified time, he had used the research on Schwartz and Weiss to design a magic tool that would search for books and documents. This new tool was a lot more mana-efficient than the two shumils, as it could neither move nor speak.

“We researched it together,” Hirschur noted, “but I will respectfully withdraw from this one. Ehrenfest already has more than enough to present this year.” She would usually present her findings herself, but for this project, she was leaving things to Raimund.

Hirschur continued, "This is valuable research, but a bit bland. There are not many libraries in the first place, so a magic tool designed for them will garner very little attention, especially compared to your research on obtaining divine protections or the new paper magic tools that Ehrenfest is making. A tool that can search for books and documents will only really appeal to researchers, considering how few documents most people have and how easy they are to manage."

Still, I was glad we were making it.

"In short," I said, "I need to make more libraries. I shall immediately begin—"

"The flow of time will remedy that for you. Making the prototype is far more important."

"More important"? So mean...

Hirschur had interrupted me before I could tell everyone my grand scheme to fill the world with libraries. I slumped my shoulders and turned to Raimund.

"Raimund, as part of our research with Drewanchel, Ehrenfest is currently in the process of making books that return to their shelves. Would you allow us to use the magic circle you amended for me before?"

"I don't believe you need my permission to use Ehrenfest paper and your own magic circles," Raimund replied. I could tell from the look in his blue eyes that he was genuinely confused, so I made sure to explain. His work had given us something that nobody else had access to.

"We intend to make it clear that you improved the magic circle for us," I said. "You need to market yourself, Raimund; otherwise you will struggle to find a good patron and will ultimately fail as a researcher."

For a poor mednoble on bad terms with his family, Raimund sure seemed unattached to his own skills and creations. If I were Benno, I would absolutely unleash some thunder on him right about now.

Don't just give away everything for free, you idiot!

"As I understand it, Ferdinand procured enormous wealth in the Royal Academy by selling the technologies and magic tools he created," I said. "Take care not to sell yourself short, Raimund."

"I will..."

"Lady Rozemyne," Hirschur interjected, "that's enough about money. One should only sell their research when they need to cover the cost of *more* research. That is what Ferdinand and I do. Now, there is not much time before the Interduchy Tournament. Let us focus on that."

I thought Hirschur was pretty amazing for having research sitting

around that she could just sell whenever she needed money. It bothered me a little that she was probably sitting on a gold mine and doing nothing about it... but it wasn't my place to intrude any more than I already had.

"Raimund, how will you report your findings to Professor Fraularm?" Hirschur asked.

"She has already seen the prototype, so there shouldn't be much more to say. That said... she was quite a handful when I sought her final confirmation the other day."

Fraularm had apparently argued that our research wasn't "joint" in the slightest, since Raimund had come up with the ideas and his mentor Ferdinand was reviewing them. She had said that I wasn't providing enough to warrant Ehrenfest's involvement and suggested that I be credited as a "helper" and nothing else. Of course, Raimund had fought back and argued that he wouldn't have been able to make the prototypes without me. In the end, he had managed to resolve the matter by very subtly threatening to consult Lord Ferdinand and Lady Detlinde.

"It is very convenient that Lady Detlinde continually provides her support, since our research reflects on her fiancé."

After our family tea party, Detlinde had even given Fraularm a stern talking-to. "Your failure to manage reports as a dormitory supervisor has brought shame to none other than the future Aub Ahrensbach," she had said. Perhaps that was what had finally spurred Fraularm to deliver my report to Ferdinand.

As I mulled over the situation, something suddenly occurred to me. "I must ask, Raimund... what do the students of the Ahrensbach Dormitory actually think of Professor Fraularm? Does everyone just accept her tyranny?"

"Well, she only becomes so demanding in response to things that involve you or Ehrenfest. She blames you for putting her little sister through a nightmarish experience when she was punished alongside her husband, Count Bindewald, who was 'deliberately lured into a trap.' Lady Georgine has since been trying to atone for your duchy's 'crimes' by assisting Professor Fraularm however she can."

Count Bindewald is that toad-looking man who went on a rampage in the temple, right? Anyone related to him is no good in my eyes. I guess Fraularm and I will never be friends after all.

Now that I understood why Fraularm was so antagonistic to me, I realized it was best for me to just keep my distance from her.

"These circumstances have also put her on excellent terms with students who dislike Ehrenfest," Raimund continued. "Like the students who weren't allowed to participate in the Dedication Ritual after they failed to pass through your shield."

Not all of Ahrensbach's apprentice scholars had been knocked back, but I definitely remembered two who hadn't been allowed inside.

Raimund averted his gaze as if unsure how to phrase his next words. "They had some very harsh words for you, Lady Rozemyne. They were formerly from Werkestock, so they resent you and your duchy for refusing to send them the mana they needed."

On top of that, the two girls were now mad that I had shamed them in front of the royal family. Fraularm had apparently consoled them while insulting me at the same time, fostering an odd sense of camaraderie among them.

"Of course, not everyone from Ahrensbach feels the same way. The apprentice scholars who were able to attend the ritual told us what it was like and explained the practicality of obtaining more divine protections. Lord Ferdinand is now seen as having tremendous value due to his former position as a High Priest and his familiarity with divine rituals."

"I see. I am glad to have been of at least some use to him."

I turned to Liesele, feeling a little pleased with myself, and signaled for her to approach. She smoothly stepped forward and presented Raimund with a letter.

"Please deliver this letter to Lord Ferdinand, if you would," I said. "It describes what he will need to bring for the Interduchy Tournament, so the sooner he receives it, the better."

Raimund accepted the letter and said, "Understood. I will return to the dormitory while you are brewing." I was relieved to hear that, but Hirschur was blinking at me in surprise.

"Ferdinand is going to be here for the Interduchy Tournament, not just to escort his fiancée during her graduation ceremony?" she asked. "As far as I am aware, Ahrensbach has no archduke candidates who could take over in his absence. How long is he going to be here?"

Indeed, Detlinde and Letizia were Ahrensbach's only archduke candidates; although Ferdinand was trusted to do administrative work, he was still considered a resident of Ehrenfest. It made no sense that he was able to attend—especially when Ahrensbach's sick aub and first wife, Georgine, were also due to participate.

I was pondering the question when Raimund spoke up. As a student of Ahrensbach, he was best suited to answer.

"There are several archnobles in Ahrensbach who were once members of our archducal family before being reduced to a lower status. They will take over during the Interduchy Tournament and such. Although matters of diplomacy must be carried out by an archducal family member, this is not the case for matters contained within the duchy. And, to my knowledge, the foundational magic will

not dry out after only a day or two of not being supplied with mana. Am I correct?"

I nodded. "It is true that foundational magics can go a day or two without new mana, but in Ehrenfest we always have at least one person stay home to supply mana in case of an emergency. I suppose that is one dissimilarity between our two duchies."

I'm already way behind when it comes to understanding noble culture, and every duchy has its own unique subculture... Man, this is hard.

Raimund soon returned to his dormitory, while I got to work brewing. This time, I was producing the magic tool that he had researched with Hirschur. My initial thought had been "Why aren't they making this themselves?" but Hirschur had quickly won me over with a few simple words: "I shall give you the tool after our presentation at the Interduchy Tournament. It is meant to be used in libraries, so I personally have no use for it." Now, I was devoted to making it perfect.

My library's going to have its very own search system!

I started putting the ingredients that Hirschur prepared into the brewing pot and stirred them all together. We chatted all the while, but we only really had one common interest: Ferdinand.

"And so," I said, "Lady Detlinde asked Ferdinand to greet her on the morning of her graduation ceremony, like a scene out of *Royal Academy Love Stories*. That is why he cannot stay in the Ahrensbach Dormitory and must instead sleep in Ehrenfest's tea party room."

Hirschur gave a half-smile. "Oh my. To think *Ferdinand* would agree to play along with such selfishness..."

I sighed and noted that it was important for Ferdinand to stay in Detlinde's good graces—but at the same time, Hirschur said that he must truly wish to return to Ehrenfest.

"What?" I replied.

"He could have secured himself a place in the Ahrensbach Dormitory simply by feeding Lady Detlinde a clever line or two, or relaxed here in my laboratory while doing research and the like. The fact that he has instead chosen to endure a night on a bench in a tea party room means that he dearly wishes to return to Ehrenfest."

Hirschur knew Ferdinand a lot better than I did, and upon hearing her words I was struck with a strange feeling—something like being both happy and sad at the same time. Perhaps, for a twisted person like Ferdinand, all those times he had written about wanting to do research had actually been his way of saying "I want to go home."

"I will do everything in my power to welcome Ferdinand," I declared.

"Then please deliver these to him," she said. "This is a transcription of the research already done on Schwartz and Weiss, and

these documents contain my own findings.”

Was it not cruel to give Ferdinand such documents? He had made it clear in his letter that the allure of research was the very reason he didn’t want to stay in Hirschur’s laboratory.

“Professor Hirschur, is your intention to keep Ferdinand from getting enough sleep?” I asked.

“Are you not doing that already, Lady Rozemyne? Your every action only adds to his headaches. Inviting the royal family to a ritual, gambling your marriage on a game of ditter with Dunkelfelger... I expect that whatever lecture he has in store for you will cost him more than a night of sleep. Spending that time lost in some leisurely research would be much better for him.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

“Is there any reality in which so many members of the royal family participating in a religious ceremony is not a hot topic during the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony?” Hirschur continued. “The professors, who have thus far had to rely on reports from the participating students, are eagerly awaiting the results of your research. It will surely draw more attention than anything else scheduled to be presented at the Interduchy Tournament. I expect Ferdinand will want to know the details.”

“Ngh...”

I could already envision Ferdinand scolding me nonstop from the moment we reunited, and my mood swiftly plummeted. I needed to do absolutely anything I could to get at least one word of praise before that happened.

After seeing me lost in thought, Lieseleita poured Hirschur a cup of tea. “Professor Hirschur, what praise and criticisms do other duchies have for Ehrenfest? Following the Dedication Ritual, Lady Charlotte found she was receiving more praise during tea parties she attended—and more smiles as people tried to butter her up. We expected some duchies to start attempting to curry favor with us, but after our game of ditter, the negative rumors vanished so quickly that it was almost disturbing.”

And these changes hadn’t been limited to archduke candidate tea parties—meetings of apprentice scholars and apprentice attendants had similarly been affected.

Gretia nodded. “The lesser and middle duchies that had acted spiteful after failing to participate in the ritual did an about-face after the ditter game. Now, they smile at us, albeit with clear malice behind their eyes. If you know the reason, Professor Hirschur, then we would ask for your input as our dormitory supervisor.”

Hirschur lowered her eyes in thought. “The duchies that participated in the ritual received words of praise directly from the

Zent and advance information on how to obtain divine protections. It is no surprise that they would be less openly negative, and now that Ehrenfest's connection to the royal family is clear to see, it is only natural that some have started trying to win you over." It was a general and quite obvious description, spoken as if the matter had nothing to do with her.

Then, Hirschur looked at my attendants. "However, as you have noticed, their smiles only veil their true feelings. I, myself, hear nothing but criticism. On top of all the negative rumors about the aub which have been so persistent, many now resent Ehrenfest's trickery."

Those who had assumed they could participate in our joint research had soon found themselves forced into playing ditler. Then, after enduring the process and suffering heavy losses, those with malice had been refused entry by my shield—and in front of the royal family. They had subsequently heeded the call of the Sovereign Knight's Order in an attempt to save face, only to learn that the knights had been manipulated and weren't acting on the king's command.

"Everyone sees Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger as being at the center of all this, and both duchies have earned much ire as a result. However, it seems to me that Ehrenfest, as the weaker of the two, is bearing the brunt of their indignation."

"I see..." Gretia murmured. "Then we will need to be cautious in more ways than one."

Hirschur gave a firm nod of agreement. "You may not realize it, as you were not students at the time, but it was only a few years ago that Ehrenfest was near the bottom of the rankings. Its position rose after the civil war, but only because the positions of the losing duchies dropped. In other words, Ehrenfest did nothing to earn its new rank—and now, in what must seem like the blink of an eye, it is forming connections with the royal family. I expect the number of envious duchies and nobles is far greater than you expect."

I remembered Cornelius saying that things were entirely different from when he first joined the Royal Academy, but I didn't have a clue how Ehrenfest had been treated back when it was a bottom-ranking duchy.

"Previously," Hirschur continued, "the loudest voices said that Ehrenfest's trends would have no staying power. But this year, they argue that your rise through the ranks is due to Lady Rozemyne's influence alone. As everyone understands it, she is responsible for your trends, your joint research with greater duchies, and your connections to royalty."

"But I wouldn't have been able to do any of that on my own..." I said. Whether it was for raising our duchy's grades or getting the

printing industry started, I was always relying on the help of others.

Hirschur's expression hardened a little. "Indeed, those accomplishments were not due to your efforts alone... but they could not have happened without you. You must reevaluate your understanding of how other duchies see you."

In their eyes, I was a female archduke candidate with an abundance of mana, the knowledge to invent various trends and technologies, first-in-class grades, connections to the royal family, and countless divine protections. I was so desirable that Dunkelfelger had tried to take me by force even though I was already engaged.

"With all that said," Hirschur continued, "I personally enjoy seeing Ehrenfest as united as it is under you. That is why I must ask you to take care. Do not lose sight of your surroundings."

"Right," I replied, while continuing to stir the ingredients around and around.

"I sent the letter," Raimund announced upon his return—then shrieked pitifully when he saw Hirschur eating at the table.

"Fret not," she said. "I set aside your share."

At once, his worries seemed to disappear. He sat down and started to eat as well.

Lieseleta, who was acting as their server, began pouring Raimund some tea. "Lord Raimund," she said, "if you do not mind, I am very curious to know whether you intend to present the sound-recording tool in its current shape. If so, do you not think it would be more adorable to combine it with a stuffed shumil?"

I recalled the shumil that Lieseleta had made. It certainly was cuter than the tool on its own and would draw a lot more attention.

That reminds me—there was also the stuffed shumil she was making for Lady Letizia.

"At the moment, Ahrensbach is receiving almost all of the credit for this research, is it not?" Lieseleta explained. "Professor Fraularm is named as the person in charge, you as the inventor, and Lord Ferdinand as the person who granted his approval. But if you have the magic tool take the form of a stuffed shumil, it will be clear to all that Lady Rozemyne participated as well. Do you not agree that the very idea sounds like something that only she would come up with? Nobody in this laboratory would have considered it, at least. And shumils are very adorable."

Hirschur gave a curt nod, indicating that she had been at least partly listening to Lieseleta's passionate speech. "It is true that neither Raimund, Ferdinand, nor I would have thought of that, and it would be an effective countermeasure to Fraularm. We intend to make it clear that Lady Rozemyne crafted the magic tool, so yes, do as you

please—as long as it does not trouble us.”

Having secured Hirschur’s disinterested approval, Lieseleta next looked at Raimund. The hopeful smile that spread across her face as she brewed his tea was... intense, to say the least. And, as Raimund was relying on her to bring him his food, he obviously wasn’t going to refuse her idea.

“I don’t mind either,” he said, “but will the stuffed animal be ready before the Interduchy Tournament?”

“It is already nearly complete,” she replied, radiating enthusiasm. “We shall bring it to you on the day of the tournament with our desired messages already recorded. By presenting both standard magic tools and stuffed shumils, I am confident that this creation of ours will appeal to men and women alike.”

Lieseleta was framing this as an opportunity to emphasize my involvement in our research with Ahrensbach, but I had a sneaking suspicion that she cared more about showing a cute shumil to the world.

Once I was back in my room, Lieseleta finished the stuffed shumil in a heartbeat. The original plan had been for me to record some voice lines for Letizia, so my mana was already registered with the sound-recording magic tool. We just needed to decide what I was going to say.

“What should I record...?” I mused aloud, hugging the white shumil to my chest. “Naturally, as this is to be presented during the Interduchy Tournament, stern words for Ferdinand are out of the question.” Making such an obvious blunder would be like *asking* him to pinch my cheeks.

“Lady Rozemyne! Lady Rozemyne!” Muriella exclaimed. “That magic tool is already so adorable, but would it not be even more wonderful if we filled it with words of love, spoken softly by a man?” Her green eyes were wavering as if the very idea was bringing her to tears.

To be frank, the “words of love” that were used in noble society meant nothing to me personally, but maybe they would be enough to make any other girl swoon. At the very least, including them would make it obvious that Raimund hadn’t done everything himself.

“That might work,” I said. “But whose voice shall we use?”

“Lady Rozemyne, I shall carefully select the most romantic lines that *Royal Academy Love Stories* has to offer,” Muriella announced. Leaving that task to her was definitely the best move; there was no way for me to know which obscure religious metaphors were the most lovely and wonderful.

We moved to the common room, whereupon Muriella started

picking out lines one after another. I couldn't help but notice that she was working a lot faster than usual.

"Matthias, Laurenz," I said, "would either one of you be willing to speak words of love into this shumil for us?" They were our most likely candidates, since Theodore's and Roderick's voices were still too high-pitched. At times like this, I actually wished that Hartmut were here; he would have repeated the phrases for us without the slightest hesitation or an ounce of embarrassment.

Upon hearing my request, Matthias let out a yelp and froze in place. Laurenz, in contrast, casually said, "Sure."

"Laurenz it is, then. G—"

"Hold on, Laurenz," Matthias said. "Are you seriously going to say w-words of... l-love in a place like this?" He pointed at all the people in the common room, trembling so much that it was almost sad.

Laurenz responded with a confused shrug. "I mean, I'm not saying them to my crush, so how's it any different from reading the book aloud? Seems to me like you're just overreacting."

"But, no—you can't just throw them around so casually. You have to save them for someone who counts, and they have to mean something every time you say them."

Even here, Matthias was being very serious. His exchange with Laurenz was amusing to listen to, but Muriella was now waiting with *Royal Academy Love Stories* in hand, wearing a smile full of anticipation.

"For now, may I ask Laurenz anyway?" I said.

"I apologize for being a pitiful retainer, unable to grant the wishes of my lady..." Matthias uttered, unable to mask his regret as he took a step back. It really wasn't something to feel so bad about, but he looked genuinely depressed.

"Matthias, you only need to worry about doing what you're good at," I reassured him. "Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses."

"Yes, my lady..."

I touched the magic tool, and we got to work recording Laurenz's voice. He spoke one phrase after another, all expertly chosen by Muriella, though I didn't really understand what any of them meant. I used the very last recording to promote Ehrenfest books on the whole; we couldn't pass up an opportunity to advertise them to the many demographics that would be attending the tournament.

"Our very own novel series, *Royal Academy Love Stories*, contains many more romantic quotes for women who wish to feel their heart race and men searching for the right words to captivate the girl of their dreams. Get a copy of your own in Ehrenfest this summer. We will also be selling nail-biters like *A Ditter Story*, *Knight Stories*, and *The*

*History of Dunkelfelger. Priceless stories at reasonable prices!”
Hopefully this gets more people interested in Ehrenfest books...*

The Interduchy Tournament (Third Year)

“We’re finished! Will this do, Lady Rozemyne?”

At lunchtime on the day before the Interduchy Tournament, Ignaz and Marianne left the brewing room and came over to me with magic tools in hand. Several apprentice scholars followed after them.

“Here are our prototypes,” Marianne said. “There are many improvements we would like to make to them, but please take a look.”

She placed one of the magic tools on the table and, after slotting in some sheet music, leisurely began to turn the attached handle. Like a music box, the tool played a tune in response. Ignaz then demonstrated his fusion of nanseb paper with our tiny, improved teleportation circle by sending a book to a nearby shelf. They had both completed their tasks.

“Unfortunately, there is not enough time before the Interduchy Tournament for any further changes to be made,” Charlotte said. “And even if there were, we do not have the mana or materials to spare.”

“Think these prototypes are good enough to present on their own?” Wilfried asked.

My siblings looked a little weary themselves; they had been helping the apprentice scholars wherever possible. In spite of their exhaustion, they—and everyone else—looked satisfied with what they had produced.

“I believe so,” I replied, then turned to Ignaz and Marianne. “I am impressed that you were able to finish them in time.”

“As am I,” Philine added, her eyes full of admiration. “Archnobles truly are incredible. Even with the advice and plans that you and Lord Raimund provided, Lady Rozemyne, I would never have been able to brew these on my own.” One’s mana capacity determined what one could make, so there was much that she couldn’t do herself.

“Royal Academy classes require a lot of mana,” Philine continued, “so I was planning to compress mine as much as possible from spring to autumn. However...”

“We will spend that time increasing our own mana capacities,” Ignaz said, wearing a competitive grin that seemed to say he wouldn’t lose to Philine and the others. I was in full support of their rivalry, as that motivation would benefit them all in the long run.

“Will you be practicing the presentation?” I asked.

“In a moment, yes. But as we invented these ourselves, I do not foresee any issues.”

Indeed, this was going to be a lot easier than presenting the high-level brews and magic tools the Drewanchel students had made—and which our own scholars still didn’t really understand.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Marianne said, “I would appreciate a more in-depth explanation of Ehrenfest paper. Limited to what can be made public, of course.”

I agreed, and we spent the afternoon completing the final preparations for our joint research with Drewanchel.

I was going to be spending the entire day in the dormitory, which meant my apprentice knights could spend the whole day training.

“Pound cakes have arrived from Ehrenfest,” Brunhilde announced. “Let us take them into the meeting room.”

The apprentice attendants all moved at once. Not just the pound cakes but also the cookies we had ordered from the Othmar Company were now being sent over. For the Interduchy Tournament, we had decided to provide baked goods that could be prepared in advance. We were expecting more visitors than the dormitory’s chefs could provide for, however, which was why we had requested help from the castle and the Othmar Company.

“The castle and temple kitchens should be fairly busy right about now,” I commented. We had asked the castle’s chefs to prepare meals for Ferdinand as well, but they had told us they were too busy with winter socializing and the Interduchy Tournament. Thus, we had passed the request on to his old chefs still serving in the High Priest’s chambers. They would surely be able to make food to his tastes.

Seeing everyone so active filled me with the excitement one felt when a festival was fast approaching.

“Lady Rozemyne, copies of the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine* have arrived with the sweets,” Lieseleta said, bringing over a box of new books. “You promised to share one with Lady Hannelore, did you not? Shall we inform her by ordonnanz?”

Muriella gave a gleeful exclamation, her green eyes sparkling as she marveled at the box. I couldn’t give this duty to any of my apprentice scholars, though; I needed them to focus on preparing for tomorrow.

“I will deliver them,” I said. “Muriella, I am afraid you will need to wait until *after* the Interduchy Tournament to read this new volume. I have not yet read it myself, you know.”

“And you will *also* need to wait until after the Interduchy Tournament, milady,” Rihyarda stressed.

I could only nod in response, accepting my harsh fate. Muriella

returned to her work with a quiet remark that she wished to read the new volume as soon as possible—and, at that moment, I felt as though our hearts were one.

It wasn't long after I informed Hannelore of the new Fernestine volume having arrived that we received her response: "I am looking forward to it," delivered in the most charmingly eager voice.

It was the morning of the Interduchy Tournament, and a sweet scent carried through the Ehrenfest Dormitory. The chefs had started making sweets immediately after preparing the dishes that kept well, such as sandwiches and soup.

Everyone finished their breakfast sooner than usual, then started on their duties for the Interduchy Tournament. The apprentice attendants directed servants while bringing one box of sweets after another out of the meeting room being used for storage. The apprentice knights who would be playing *ditter* focused on their training exercises, and those who were too young instead guarded our archduke candidates.

"Alright. Let's go!" Wilfried ordered the apprentice scholars; he and Charlotte were helping them set up the platform for their presentation.

I asked to go with them, but my request was immediately deemed "too unsafe," since only the younger apprentice knights were accompanying me today.

"We can't predict what the lesser and middle duchies that invaded our *ditter* game might do," Wilfried explained. "I've asked Mother and Father to bring more of the Knight's Order as guards this year. Stay in the dormitory until they arrive."

"Understood," I replied. He was evidently taking things very seriously, so I couldn't just insist on following them anyway. "I wish you well with your preparations."

And so, I merely stood and watched as Wilfried and Charlotte left with the apprentice scholars. I knew it had to be this way for safety's sake, but I couldn't help feeling left out.

There were still some people going in and out of the dormitory for one reason or another, but I was now almost entirely alone in the common room. I gazed around at its vast emptiness, at which point Rihyarda placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"Perhaps you could go check the tea party room, milady. Preparations have now been made for Lord Ferdinand and the others to sleep there."

"I think I will."

Together, we made our way to the door closest to the stairway leading to the kitchen—the entrance to the tea party room. Rihyarda

unlocked the door with a *clunk* and then opened it for me.

Tea party rooms were quite large, as one could infer from the fact we had invited representatives from every single duchy to ours when I was a first-year. I stepped inside to find that a series of screens now divided the interior into what were essentially three individual rooms.

“The ‘room’ farthest from the entrance is for Lord Ferdinand and contains that special bench for him to sleep on,” Rihyarda said. “We had it sent over from Ehrenfest as per your request, milady.”

It was the mattress bench ordered from Zack. Sending it all the way from Ehrenfest had apparently been troublesome and resulted in many complaints, but it was guaranteed to be a lot more comfortable than just sticking cushions on a flat board with some sheets pulled over it. I made sure it had a proper mattress, then nodded with satisfaction.

“I see this box contains the comforter,” I said. “Justus will understand what to do once everything has been explained to him. There are also many checks to be done, as there is going to be an Ahrensbach retainer present.”

As well as the box containing the comforter were a chest for storing one’s luggage and a magic tool that would provide light.

“These are not quite bed curtains,” Rihyarda said, indicating the screens, “but I expect they will make it easier for Lord Ferdinand to sleep.”

There was a chair for the attendant who would be serving as night watchman, so the furthest away space was purely for sleeping. The middle “room” contained a table and chairs. The person overseeing the preparations for the tea party room had probably assumed that everyone would eat together here.

“After the Interduchy Tournament, the aub will eat with the students and praise their efforts,” Rihyarda explained. “You and my boy Wilfried are to come here and treat Lord Ferdinand in the meantime. Lord Sylvester will join us once everyone has eaten.”

My heart soared at the thought of eating dinner with Ferdinand—but then I realized he would probably spend the entire meal lecturing me. To avoid that worst-case scenario, I would need to do exactly as Eckhart had taught me and continually bring up research.

“Rihyarda,” I said, “I would like to offer Ferdinand the documents that Hirschur gave me. Please prepare some ink and paper as well.”

“It is already done, milady.”

In classic Rihyarda fashion, she was already one step ahead. That research could easily become our main topic of conversation for the night, and with Ferdinand so starved for new knowledge, I didn’t see how it could go wrong.

“Also, I think we should make this area closest to the door a

resting spot for retainers,” I said. Like in the “room” we were giving Ferdinand, there was a box containing a comforter and a chest for one’s luggage, but it was fairly barren otherwise. At the very least, it wasn’t good enough for someone visiting from another duchy.

Rihyarda shook her head. “We need not put so much thought into where the retainers sleep. Justus is a wanderer who would even sleep outside without complaint, Eckhart is used to harsh accommodations as a knight, and the Ahrensbach retainer will presumably be too on edge to sleep at all. No one from another duchy would so willingly let down their guard in a room that anyone from Ehrenfest can enter.”

Indeed, for Ferdinand and the others from Ehrenfest, this was like a comfortable return to their homeland. The same could not be said for someone from Ahrensbach.

Rihyarda continued, “As there are going to be people from other duchies arriving after breakfast to welcome the graduating students, we have decided to hide the fact that anyone spent the night here.”

Just as Ferdinand was having to fetch Detlinde, members of other duchies were going to be coming to us to pick up Ehrenfest students. As soon as Ferdinand and the others finished eating breakfast, our tea party room would need to be prepared to accommodate guests.

“I see you have all thought this out. Thank you, Rihyarda. Tell the other attendants that they have my thanks as well.”

“Yes, milady.”

Having confirmed that all of the necessary preparations were complete, I returned to the common room.

“Good day, Lady Rozemyne.”

Little by little, the guardians of our graduating students began to arrive. I watched as parents dressed in gaudy attire headed to the arena where the tournament was being held—an ordinary sight by this point—and soon spotted some familiar faces among one of the groups passing through. Cornelius, Angelica, and Hartmut were dressed in formal clothing like everyone else.

“Lady Rozemyne,” they said. “Good morning.”

“You three!” I exclaimed despite myself. “What are you doing here at the Royal Academy?”



“I came to see my fiancée perform,” Hartmut replied. “I also need to properly inform her family of the change in my situation and earn their pardon.”

It was very likely that his new position as High Priest would result in his engagement with Clarissa being canceled. It was my fault, really—but as I was reflecting on that, Hartmut smiled.

“You need not worry,” he said. “I expect that the Zent’s participation in your Dedication Ritual and the newfound efficacy of religious ceremonies will prevent them from lodging any meaningful protests. Even if they do, I am certain that Clarissa will come to Ehrenfest alone, if need be. We will need to discuss what to do in such an event.”

“Indeed we will...” I replied with a giggle, remembering Clarissa’s enthusiasm and intensity. She certainly did seem like someone who would charge into Ehrenfest all on her own, so some preparations were in order.

“Are you here for your fiancée as well, Cornelius?” I asked, shooting him a teasing look. “Did you come to see Leonore perform?” If so, then it was surely fine for me to treat him not as a guard knight but as my brother.

“We’re here to protect you, but we were told to be discreet about it and to have reasonable excuses for attending. Personally, I’m here to see both you and Leonore.”

In other words, I was justified in treating him as my brother. That was nice to know; I would need to explain in excruciating detail just how hard Leonore had been working this year.

“What about you, Angelica?” I asked. “Hartmut and Cornelius both have fiancées, but you don’t have a partner in the Royal Academy, do you?”

“I came to see whether Traugott has grown strong enough to receive my hand in marriage. If not, I will marry Lord Bonifatius...” Angelica explained, her voice tinged with sorrow.

From a third-party perspective, Traugott was a much more appropriate suitor than the elderly Bonifatius. Angelica only had eyes for strength, however, and if one were to pit the two men against each other in that regard... Well, it was no contest.

“But don’t be fooled,” Cornelius interjected with an exasperated shrug. “This is all just an excuse Angelica came up with to avoid having to memorize the names of the gods.” It seemed that her desire to escape from studying overlapped with Bonifatius’s reluctance to marry someone young enough to be his granddaughter.

“Angelica, you’ll grow stronger if you obtain more divine blessings,” I said. “If nothing else... memorize the names of the

primary gods, and the subordinate gods you want the divine protections of.”

“I think I can do that...” she replied, seeming a bit more motivated. If she could manage that much, then I was confident she would succeed. Lueuradi of Jossbrenner had already obtained a new divine protection after praying ceaselessly to the Goddess of Sprouts.

“Incidentally, is Damuel not coming?” I asked. Of all my guard knights staying in Ehrenfest, he was the one person who was nowhere to be seen. Only three people could teleport at a time, so I thought that maybe he just hadn’t arrived yet... but Cornelius shook his head.

“As a mana detection specialist, he was asked to stay behind and observe the former Veronica faction. But above all else, he didn’t have a good excuse for coming to the Royal Academy.”

Hartmut nodded. “I gave him some very sage advice in my suggestion that he start dating one of the students, but he simply wailed that it wasn’t possible.”

“Don’t be such a bully, Hartmut!” I cried. “You know he can’t get a girlfriend and is struggling with his lack of marriage prospects! I bet you gave him that ‘advice’ right after putting on your most handsome smile and bragging about going to see your younger fiancée perform onstage. It’s just cruel!”

Damuel was a sensitive soul; having to endure such mean teasing very well might have broken his heart. I could already picture him shedding silent tears, unable to talk back to an archnoble like Hartmut.

Hartmut merely smiled in the face of my complaints, not showing an ounce of regret. “I gave Damuel that advice because I believe he could succeed if only he tried. Do you not think *you* are being cruel, Lady Rozemyne, for assuming that he will never find a partner no matter what he does?”

“Eep!”

He’s right... I’m sorry, Damuel. Instead of believing in you, I just kind of accepted that you were going to be single forever. I’ve been a failure of a lady.

But no more. From this point forward, I was going to start believing in Damuel. He *was* capable of getting a girlfriend. He *would* secure himself a wife!

As I was hammering those thoughts into my mind as facts, someone knocked the back of my head. “Hey there, problem child. Causing any problems today?”

I turned to see Sylvester looking down at me. There were heavy bags under his eyes, and his cheeks were more gaunt than the last time I saw him. All that, coupled with the sickly pallor of his face, spoke to how extremely draining it must have been cleaning up after

the purge.

"Hi, Sylvester," I said. "You seem pretty tired."

"And whose fault do you think that is?" He prodded my cheek and started grinding his finger into it. "Once you're back in Ehrenfest, get ready for the lecture of a lifetime, missy."

I groaned, already able to imagine the thunder he was going to unleash. "Would, um... one of Ferdinand's rejuvenation potions cheer you up?"

"Trying to finish me off, are you?" he asked, responding to my generosity with a sharp glare.

"I wouldn't give you one of *those* potions in a situation like this. I'm referring to the kind version. We have some left over from the batch we made for the Dedication Ritual."

"No thanks. That would only make me drowsy." He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Now, if you're ready, let's get going."

I looked around, but I could only see members of the Ehrenfest Knight's Order. Florencia was nowhere to be seen, nor was Karstedt among Sylvester's guards.

"Sylvester, where are Florencia and Father?" I asked.

"Karstedt and Bonifatius are staying home; we don't know what the former Veronica faction might do if too many of us come here for the Interduchy Tournament. As for Florencia... I made her stay in bed today. She looked as sickly as you normally do before you collapse."

"What?!" I exclaimed. "I-Is she okay?!" I didn't think I'd ever seen Florencia unwell before; she always wore a calm smile and never looked fazed in the slightest.

Sylvester shook his head. "Nothing we can do but let her rest. The Interduchy Tournament would have put too much pressure on her, what with all the negotiations between duchies and the like. If she's feeling better by tomorrow morning, then I'll say she can come to the graduation ceremony. She should be able to make it through that, since it only involves sitting and watching."

We had been so swamped with visitors last year that we had spent the entire day keeping up with them, and it was easy to imagine that we would receive even more this year, considering how many duchies had participated in our Dedication Ritual. Sylvester was right: it wasn't a good environment for someone who was feeling sick.

"You and I are going to pair up for socializing this year, as are Wilfried and Charlotte. After all the trouble you've caused since the last tournament, who knows what visitors we'll get. My head aches just thinking about it."

"My apologies..."

I sped through my remaining preparations, then started toward the arena with my retainers, Sylvester, and the knights protecting him.

Along the way, we gave words of encouragement to those who were going to be presenting research or playing ditter and went over our plan for today's socializing.

"We must check your capes and brooches before you can enter."

Upon reaching the entrance of the arena, we were stopped by several black-caped members of the Sovereign Knight's Order. More careful checks were now being carried out as a result of last year's attack, as the terrorists had gotten in using Werkestock brooches.

Because I was with Sylvester, an archduke, we were allowed through after just a brief inspection.

The atmosphere in the arena was a lot more tense than last year. Sovereign knights were positioned all around, and many of the attendees looked uncomfortable under their pointed glares. This uneasy situation would no doubt continue until either Werkestock's foundational magic was discovered or the Grutrissheit was found.

"Rozemyne, where's our spot?"

"I would imagine over there, near that huge clump of ocher capes. I was told to stay in the dormitory until you arrived, so I haven't been here since before they started getting ready for the tournament."

It was worth noting that, because I was so short, I could barely see past all the guard knights surrounding us.

"I see. Sounds like you've been trying to keep things peaceful in your own way," Sylvester replied, sounding a little satisfied as he made his way toward our students.

"You should praise Wilfried, not me. I intended to take part in all the preparations."

"You really need to be more conscious of your safety..."

After passing through one throng of colored capes after another, we arrived at Ehrenfest's spot to find that everyone was ready for the tournament.

"Aub Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne. This way."

Brunhilde guided us to our seats, whereupon Sylvester explained that Florencia was absent and told us how we were going to attend to today's guests.

"Oh my. Mother cannot participate?" Charlotte said. "Is she okay?"

"She might be well enough to come tomorrow. No pressure, but if we mess up socializing today, she'll be devastated and think she let us all down. Don't let that happen."

"Right."

Wilfried and Charlotte sat down together, but I sat with Sylvester. He had positioned his chair so that he could easily kick my leg—a signal for me to shut my mouth at once, he explained. Ehrenfest knights were lined up behind us, while Hartmut, Cornelius, and

Angelica were nearby, all dressed in adult clothing.

“Our first visitors are going to be from Dunkelfelger. I guarantee it,” Cornelius said, his expression guarded. “They keep looking over at us. I can tell they’re pretty much champing at the bit.”

Dunkelfelger was on the opposite side of the arena from us, so its spot was easy to observe. I enhanced my eyesight and saw that, indeed, Aub Dunkelfelger was standing right on the duchy line with an eager-looking band of knights. Hannelore was desperately trying to pull him back by his cape.

Lady Hannelore sure has it rough... I’m so glad I wasn’t reincarnated into Dunkelfelger.

A slender woman then approached the father-daughter pair and said... something. I was too far away to make out her remark, but whatever it was, it made the aub trudge back to his table.

She must be his first wife.

Also sitting at the table was Lestilaut, and beside him was a girl wearing a familiar hairpin. She was probably his fiancée.

“Is that Lord Ferdinand over there?” Hartmut suddenly asked. “I can see Ehrenfest capes among the Ahrensbach ones.”

I turned my attention to Ahrensbach’s spot, which was right beside Dunkelfelger’s. Just as Hartmut had said, there were three dark-yellow capes among the light-violet ones: Ferdinand, Justus, and Eckhart. I watched them closely, trying not to lean over the table in my excitement.

I could see Raimund holding the stuffed shumil for his presentation and desperately trying to explain something to Ferdinand, who was rubbing his temples. Justus had a hand over his mouth as he tried to stifle his laughter. Evidently, our magic tool idea was being very well received. I wanted to go over and give Raimund some support, but Ahrensbach’s spot was too far away.

“Ferdinand isn’t coming this way...” I murmured.

“I expect he’ll come along when the others from Ahrensbach greet us,” Sylvester replied. “He’s already involved in their administration, and they need to further publicize his engagement this year.”

That greeting would be a good opportunity to hand over Heisshtitze’s cape, I thought. I saw the box Rihyarda had at the ready and smiled.

“Ditter shall now begin!” Rauffen announced. “The called duchy will come forth!”

The Interduchy Tournament had officially begun. There was a declaration from Klassenberg the First, and the first duchy was summoned.

At once, a group of Dunkelfelgerians began moving in our direction, with the first wife gracefully taking the lead and Hannelore

hurrying along behind her. They were on the opposite side of the arena from us, so they had quite a ways to go.

Hm? What about Aub Dunkelfelger?

The aub had looked almost desperate to see us a moment ago, but he hadn't moved from his seat. He was staying behind with Lestilaut, it appeared.

Maybe the first wife doesn't want him challenging us to ditter again.

I continued to watch them with my head tilted to one side.

Meanwhile, our apprentice attendants began preparing for Dunkelfelger's arrival, and Sylvester sat up straight.

"Keep your head straight, Rozemyne. They're coming. We're going to demand that they stop trying to court you and make it clear that we're not taking Lady Hannelore, right?"

"Right!"

Ehrenfest didn't want to put up with any more of this troublesome business, so we had informed Dunkelfelger through letters and reports that we were open to negotiating if they stopped trying to get my engagement canceled.

"Wilfried, Charlotte—Rozemyne and I are gonna be hosting the greater duchies, starting with Dunkelfelger," Sylvester explained. "You two deal with everyone else."

Wilfried and Charlotte replied with firm nods.

As our first visitors came closer and closer, Hartmut checked the ink and paper alongside the scholars, while Cornelius and Angelica moved to more easily defensible positions.

Socializing with Dunkelfelger

“Good day, Aub Ehrenfest,” Dunkelfelger’s first wife said when she arrived in front of us. Her eyes—which were as red as Hannelore’s—were crinkled in a smile, but it was clear that she was observing us intently. She was scary in an entirely different way from Aub Dunkelfelger, who chirped incessantly about ditter.

“Good day, Lady Sieglinde of Dunkelfelger,” I replied, feeling so tense that my throat went dry. Sylvester and I both stood up to give proper greetings, then we offered Sieglinde and Hannelore seats.

“Printing, books, rituals...” Sieglinde said with a smile. “There is much I wish for us to discuss, but let us first focus on that eventful game of ditter, which holds great significance for the future of both our duchies. Although there was an interruption midway through, the judge did not pause the match. Thus, it concluded when Hannelore willingly left Dunkelfelger’s base.”

Sieglinde spoke in a soft voice and with a peaceful expression, but she was noticeably critical of her daughter’s actions. Hannelore herself was looking down at the ground and visibly shrinking into herself.

“Lady Hannelore left her base only because it was too dangerous for her to remain there without guard knights,” I said, trying to justify her decision. She had been fearfully enduring the onslaught from above all on her own, without anyone to protect her. But despite my pleas, Sieglinde’s smile never so much as wavered.

“The knights headed skyward to protect their treasure from the attack magic raining down upon them,” she replied. “And yet, Hannelore still decided to leave the base of her own will. In doing so, did she not betray those who were fighting for her sake?”

That wasn’t how I viewed the situation at all. “I was raised to believe that archduke candidates are to be guarded by their knights. As such, Lady Hannelore being left alone constitutes a dereliction of duty for those meant to protect her.”

“Oh my... Is this to say that Ehrenfest considers Hannelore’s actions acceptable?”

Hannelore’s actions might have been deserving of criticism by Dunkelfelger standards, but we saw things differently in Ehrenfest. I thought to protest further, but Sylvester spoke up from beside me before I could.

“Guard knights live to protect the archducal family, and one’s

treasure should be considered above all else in a game of ditler. It is the fault of the knights that Lady Hannelore was taken.”

Right! Exactly! The guard knights are to blame for abandoning her!

I showed my agreement with a big nod.

Sieglinde cast her eyes down in thought. “So, is this Ehrenfest’s stance? Hannelore should not be blamed for leaving Dunkelfelger’s base of her own volition.”

I was glad to see that Sieglinde didn’t share Aub Dunkelfelger’s desire to resolve every dispute with a game of ditler—and it seemed that we had even come to something of an understanding. Before I could express my relief, however, her lips twisted into a more determined smile.

“I see now that even if Tarkus is born through Flutrane’s power, the guidance of Dregarnuhr will unfailingly take him to Verfuhereimer...” she said, then sighed so ambiguously that it was hard to tell whether she was feeling relief or regret.

Er, what does that mean?

To begin with, the name “Tarkus” didn’t ring a bell. Was it a kind of animal unique to Dunkelfelger? Or perhaps a minor figure from some obscure mythos?

I think I can work out the rest, though. Tarkus—whoever or whatever that is—would evidently be born in fresh water and then end up going to the ocean when the time is right. So what Sieglinde means to say is... when people grow up, they move to places that better suit who they are?

As I was working through what she meant, maintaining a vague smile all the while, Sieglinde looked between Sylvester and me. I suddenly felt trapped in her red eyes, and I couldn’t help but swallow hard.

“Dunkelfelger lost the match, so Hannelore will marry into Ehrenfest,” Sieglinde said plainly. “That should do, as it seems that your duchy is her Verfuhereimer.”

Hold on a moment! Did she just agree to give Lady Hannelore to Ehrenfest? Before we even had a chance to say she doesn’t have to?!

Sieglinde was bringing the discussion to an end before we could even express our thoughts or hopes. Sylvester and I exchanged looks before hurrying to change her mind.

“You, um... You mentioned that marrying into Ehrenfest is what Lady Hannelore desires, but is that true? She will end up being only a second wife.”

The very idea of an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger, the second-highest-ranked duchy in Yurgenschmidt, becoming a second wife in Ehrenfest was unthinkable. Sieglinde seemed like someone who was willing to listen to reason—unlike her ditler-obsessed husband—so I wanted her to think about her daughter’s future a little

more carefully. However...

“She left our duchy’s base of her own will,” Sieglinde said. “For her to have made such a choice, she must have desired the natural consequences. We were more troubled than anyone to learn that a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate wishes to hold a secondary position in Ehrenfest.”

Sieglinde seemed convinced that her daughter had acted out of self-interest... but I couldn’t think of one occasion when Hannelore had mentioned wanting to marry into Ehrenfest. I kept half an eye on my fellow bookworm, but she just kept staring at the ground with her mouth shut, like she was swallowing whatever it was she wanted to say.

Lady Hannelore...

Seeing her like this, I was reminded of when Lestilaut had silenced her protests while challenging us to ditter. No matter how you looked at it, she wasn’t acting like someone who wanted to marry into Ehrenfest; on closer inspection, she was literally trembling.

Sylvester, having likely come to the same conclusion, turned his dark-green eyes to Sieglinde. “If you would allow me to be so bold, I would say that Ehrenfest is an upstart duchy that just barely reached eighth place in the duchy rankings and does not yet meet the expectations put upon it. We are in no position to host a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.”

Sieglinde nodded with a smile. “You are correct. At the moment, Ehrenfest’s only value is in Lady Rozemyne, who introduces new trends and industries, knows an impressive amount about ancient language and rituals, and possesses the leadership necessary to unify her dormitory despite all that is happening. You are far from being worthy of one of our archduke candidates.”

She was agreeing with us, but it was still irritating. In regard to our trends and such, I only came up with the ideas; our craftspeople deserved all the credit for making them. And while I *did* manage the dormitory to some degree, Wilfried was much better at pumping everyone up and getting them focused on a single goal. I was also terrible at socializing and needed to rely on Charlotte to attend tea parties in my place.

Before I could protest, however, Sylvester gave me a light kick. That was the signal for me to keep my mouth shut, so I did just that, no matter how dissatisfied it made me feel.

Sieglinde watched Sylvester with her head very slightly tilted. “I can understand why Ehrenfest, a duchy that is rising through the ranks, would desire an archduke candidate from somewhere as historied as Dunkelfelger. But I must ask: Why do you want her as a *second* wife?”

To explain that, we would need to delve into our behind-the-scenes struggle with Ahrensbach. I wasn't sure how much we could reveal, so I gazed up at Sylvester for support.

"I can say only that it relates to Ehrenfest's internal circumstances."

"Oh my. But the purpose of a first wife is to be exploited. She is used as a means to secure the diplomatic support of her home family. Second wives are then taken from one's own duchy and are tasked with managing its nobles. Surely even Ehrenfest is aware of this dynamic."

Is that true for all duchies or just Dunkelfelger?

It sounded reasonable enough to be a universal rule, but I'd never heard it phrased in such a way before. I decided to remain silent, while Sylvester said nothing and merely looked at Sieglinde.

"Pray tell," Sieglinde continued, "what internal circumstances made you think it best to put Hannelore in the completely fruitless position of second wife? As she would only ever be able to socialize within Ehrenfest, you would be severing a truly valuable tie to our duchy. I am ever so eager to know, Aub Ehrenfest."

"Top-ranking duchies have their own methods, and so do we" was all that Sylvester said in response. We had just purged the former Veronica faction, and we couldn't risk angering the Leisegang faction too.

"Of course," Sieglinde replied, "but my argument still stands. I see it as meaningless for Ehrenfest to take a wife from a top-ranking duchy when you are being completely and voluntarily ignorant of common-sense diplomacy. Worse still, it appears that you have no desire to climb the duchy rankings further—or even maintain your current position, for that matter. I am fond of my daughter, despite how it may appear, and I would rather she not suffer the same unfortunate fate as a certain Ahrensbach romantic, who married an Ehrenfest archduke candidate due to become an archduke some generations ago."

She was indirectly criticizing the aub of the time for his poor treatment of the situation. He had reduced the next archduke to an archnoble while welcoming her, failed to raise his duchy's rank, failed to deepen its relationship with Ahrensbach, and ultimately failed to control his own nobles.

"It takes many moons spanning a generation before an entire noble population adjusts to how a top-ranking duchy must carry itself. Decades have passed since Ehrenfest welcomed that Ahrensbach archduke candidate. How has it changed since then?"

Sieglinde expressed no sympathy for Ehrenfest having been turned upside down by Gabriele of Ahrensbach. On the one hand, this helped

me to understand how greater duchies viewed things... but on the other, it just irritated me further.

“Over the past few years, Ehrenfest has shot up through the rankings thanks to the windfall that Lady Rozemyne provided,” Sieglinde said. “However, it seems to me that your duchy has not changed in the least.”

From there, she obliquely and elegantly voiced the same criticisms we’d already received from Lestilaut. Sylvester listened carefully while wearing the same expression I was used to seeing from Wilfried. The indirect phrasing and plethora of euphemisms meant I only really understood about half of what was being said, but I was still getting increasingly upset.

Is listening quietly how nobles are supposed to socialize?

“So, what will your next move be, Aub Ehrenfest?” Sieglinde asked. “It must be clear to you by now that Lady Rozemyne is too large a soul to be contained within Ehrenfest for much longer.”

Despite my frustration, I continued to listen in silence—mostly because Sylvester was kicking my leg every time it looked as though I might speak up. Still, I didn’t want someone else deciding whether I was “too large a soul” for Ehrenfest.

“Geduldh chose to protect Mestionora by letting her go and entrusting her to Schutzaria,” Sieglinde went on. “It will be best for Lady Rozemyne and for everyone she knows if she is moved to a land where she can operate to her heart’s content.”

She was speaking in a kind voice and with an affable expression, but she was effectively telling Sylvester to give me up already. My heart was full of nothing but bitterness.

Sylvester muttered, “This is so stupid...” and then glanced my way. “Is all this Dunkelfelger volunteering to play the part of Schutzaria?”

“Yes, for she will serve as a shield to protect Mestionora and Ehrenfest, the duchy Hannelore is marrying into.”

Hadn’t I agreed to play ditto specifically to keep Sylvester from being pressured like this? And why were we having to listen to her criticize us for things that had nothing to do with our match? To top it all off, this had somehow turned into a conversation about Dunkelfelger protecting me or something.

Sieglinde kept using indirect phrasing to criticize us and move the conversation in the direction she pleased, all the while maintaining an elegant smile. It was like she was toying with us, gradually tightening the noose around our necks, and it angered me so much that I was dying to throw her words right back in her face.

“Excuse me, dear adoptive father,” I said, looking up at him. “Would we not benefit from some scissors to cut this rope around our

throats?"

Sylvester widened his eyes, then shut them and waved a hand in defeat. "Do what you want. I'll take care of whatever happens next."

Having secured the permission I needed, I made direct eye contact with Sieglinde, making sure to maintain my elegant smile and posture. "Lady Sieglinde, are you perhaps unfamiliar with the terms under which our duchies played ditter?"

"On the contrary. I was told about them at length," she replied, her gaze sharpening in what must have been an attempt to silence me.

"Then why do you ignore the results of our sacred game? Lord Lestilaut gave us his word that Ehrenfest would not be pressured into ending my engagement if we won." Then, casting aside all the ambiguity of noble speech, I smiled and said, "You lost. Be silent as losers should be."

Sieglinde merely stared at me as if my words were so direct that she hadn't been able to process them.

"Lady Rozemyne..." Hannelore muttered. She had been facing the ground this entire time, but now she was looking between Sieglinde and me with wide, blinking eyes.

"Just as Flutrane and Heilschmerz heal in their own ways, what a third party wishes to see and what is satisfactory for those actually involved can be drastically different," I said. "My mentor once told me that those who seek eternal peace do not need Glucklitat's divine protection." It was a euphemism that meant exactly the same thing as when Ferdinand had used it: "Get out of my face; I don't need or want your help."

Sieglinde's expression changed. "For what reason did you request Hannelore?"

"To prevent a bothersome game of ditter from being forced upon us. My intention was to have our aubs discuss the matter instead, as I did not think Lord Lestilaut would have the authority to gamble Lady Hannelore's future, but he took the decision into his own hands anyway. You were already aware of all this, I expect."

The smile vanished from Sieglinde's face, and she looked between Hannelore and me. "Did you not select Hannelore because Ehrenfest needs her for some reason or another?"

"Not at all; we always intended to nullify that condition after winning. It would be intolerably rude to have Lady Hannelore move to Ehrenfest, after all. I even hoped to use whatever little influence our victory would afford me to help her marry into the duchy of her choosing."

"You *always* intended to, you say?"

Indeed, while Lestilaut and Wilfried were ironing out the specifics of our ditter match, Hannelore and I were discussing what we would

do if Ehrenfest won. I was genuinely surprised that Sieglinde didn't seem to know this.

All of a sudden, Sylvester smirked. He was poised to strike, like a warrior who had just found his enemy's weak point. "As you indicated through your Ahrensbach example, Ehrenfest has not yet matured enough to house an archduke candidate from a greater duchy. If you wish to ensure the happiness of your beloved daughter, then do accept our request."

In short, he was suggesting that we sweep this whole discussion about Hannelore marrying into our duchy under the rug for good. Sieglinde had just made some severely critical remarks about Ehrenfest; she was bound to leap at the chance to keep her daughter from moving there.

Or so I thought. For some strange reason, Sieglinde started to ponder the offer and then said, "What do you intend to do if my daughter *wants* to marry into Ehrenfest? Will you embrace common sense and take her as a first wife? Or will you maintain this irrational approach of yours?"

"My sincerest apologies, but Ehrenfest has not yet learned the ways of the top-ranking duchies," Sylvester replied with a smile. Amid the chaos of the purge, Ehrenfest needed to prioritize peace and stability above all else, no matter how irrational it made us seem. We didn't need any controversies that would rile up even more of our nobles.

"So you will accept her only as a second wife..." Sieglinde remarked. But before she could continue, Hannelore tugged on her sleeve with trembling hands.

"Mother, Ehrenfest won."

It wasn't just her hands—her entire body was shaking like a leaf. But her eyes were filled with resolve, and she didn't falter as she looked up at her mother and said:

"Do not bother Ehrenfest any further."

"Hannelore?"

Hannelore turned to look at Wilfried, who was hosting nobles at another table. I couldn't tell whether the air she was radiating was real or just my imagination; there was a warm look in her eyes and an even warmer smile on her face.

"He was the first person to say he would protect me on the battlefield—the first person to offer me a choice, not give me an order. Thus, during that moment, I truly wished to marry into Ehrenfest." She lowered her eyes for a moment, then looked at her mother head-on. The tenderness was gone from her expression, replaced with the determination of someone facing down a challenge. "However, Ehrenfest has said they cannot accommodate an archduke candidate

from a greater duchy. They are not ready to welcome me, so pressing the matter further would only serve to inconvenience them. Is it truly acceptable for us to bother the winners after we forced them to play against us to begin with? Should we not grant their wish, at the very least?"

"Hannelore..." Sieglinde muttered. Judging by the troubled look on her face, she had not predicted this turn of events.



“Mother, making such one-sided demands is not the Dunkelfelger way. Should we not be helping Ehrenfest to realize their own desires? Let us take a step back and start by learning what will benefit them.”

The proud smile with which Hannelore spoke made it plain to see that she was a true Dunkelfelger woman. I was so moved that I almost started to applaud her, but Sieglinde didn't seem to share my enthusiasm; she rested a hand on her cheek and glared at Hannelore, then looked at Sylvester and me.

“We are in general agreement, as I see it, but we are also plagued by various misunderstandings. Allow me to address them.”

Misunderstandings? What, like Ehrenfest not having the same kind of common sense as a greater duchy?

Sylvester and I didn't really understand where she was going with this, but we gestured for her to continue nonetheless.

“According to the reports I received, Lady Rozemyne, had your duchy lost our ditler match, Aub Ehrenfest would have canceled your current engagement and allowed you to become Dunkelfelger's first wife. It was conversely agreed that Hannelore would become your duchy's second wife if you won.”

“That's correct,” I replied with a nod.

Sieglinde eyed me suspiciously and then glanced over her shoulder. A scholarly man who had been standing behind her stepped forward, placed a sheet of paper on the table between us, then returned to his position. It was a formal report that had been sent to Dunkelfelger and outlined the terms of our ditler game.

“You say that Ehrenfest always intended to let Hannelore go, but when was that actually agreed upon?” She indicated the paper. “It is not mentioned here at all.”

“When the match was first being discussed. Is that not right, Lady Hannelore?”

She nodded. “Lady Rozemyne made the suggestion when I apologized for my brother's selfish behavior.” We had been drinking tea and using sound-blocking magic tools at the time.

After listening to our brief description of events, Sieglinde made a face as if to say she had deduced everything. “Your discussion may have taken place at the same time in the same room, but you were using sound-blocking magic tools. Did you report your agreement after?” The way she spoke made me anxious that I was being accused of claiming our private conversation was a public agreement.

“That very same evening.” I turned to Sylvester. “I gave a report to Wilfried and contacted Ehrenfest, did I not?”

“You did,” he replied. “I received a detailed report on both discussions.”

I sighed in relief, having successfully proven my innocence. Hannelore puffed out her chest and similarly declared, "I reported everything to my brother over dinner."

"Over dinner?" Sieglinde asked. "Would that not have been too late? Why did you not speak with Lestilaut immediately? Introducing new information after the contract has been signed and the conditions finalized is counterproductive."

"Pardon? The contract?" I asked.

Wilfried had acknowledged my report about nullifying Hannelore's marriage into Ehrenfest, and Hannelore had been nodding along in agreement, so I'd assumed that everyone was on the same page. But those things hadn't been discussed at the same time and place.

Hannelore had reported my intentions to Lestilaut, but since he had already ironed out the details and signed a contract with Wilfried, they hadn't been formally processed.

Again, Sieglinde indicated the paper between us. "Contracts are an integral part of bride-taking ditter. They ensure that any agreements made cannot be changed after the match."

"Wait... this is a *contract*, not a report?" I asked. A closer look revealed that Wilfried had indeed signed it. Apparently, this was important for executing a budget too.

Sylvester likewise peered down at the document and frowned. "I was aware that terms were decided, but I never received word of a contract being signed."

"Wilfried neglected to inform me as well..." I said, looking in his direction with my brow furrowed. I doubted that he would have failed to mention something so important.

"Perhaps he did not realize this is a contract," Hannelore muttered. "They are used often in Dunkelfelger and are necessary in the Royal Academy for budgetary reasons, but if even Lady Rozemyne and Aub Ehrenfest were unaware..."

Sylvester and I turned to one another and nodded; we had both assumed the paper was some kind of application form for playing ditter, not a contract. If Lestilaut hadn't made it clear what was being signed, then it was possible that Wilfried had mistaken it for a budget document.

"It appears we did not explain ourselves well enough," Sieglinde said with a slight grimace, then pointed to the conditions of our ditter game. "It is written here that Ehrenfest will take Hannelore as a second wife, but there is no mention of the agreement being nullified."

"I thought we could propose it after, when our aubs met to discuss the match..." I said.

“Would such an arbitrary change not have defeated the purpose of making an agreement in the first place?”

True...

I hadn't known about the contract, but that didn't change the fact that I'd intended to challenge the terms of our agreement—the very thing I was criticizing Dunkelfelger for doing. I slumped my shoulders, disappointed in myself, as Sieglinde landed another blow.

“Furthermore, Lady Rozemyne... you said that Dunkelfelger agreed to stop interfering with your engagement in the event that Ehrenfest won, correct? No such condition is listed here.”

“What?” I asked, blinking in surprise. “But is the challenger not meant to give up on the object of their affection after losing a game of bride-taking ditter? Lord Lestilaut explained as much to me.”

“I was told that Ehrenfest prioritized taking Hannelore as a second wife. She is listed as your desired prize, but there is no mention of us accepting your current engagement.”

In a normal game of bride-taking ditter, the consequence of the challenger losing was already decided: they would give up on pursuing the woman they were trying to steal. But after I had expressed my dissatisfaction with that condition and demanded that we be able to take Hannelore as a second wife, Lestilaut had determined that there was no need to stop pressuring me and reported as much to Dunkelfelger.

“This is the first I am hearing of that condition being removed...” I muttered.

Sylvester heaved a long, exhausted sigh before prodding me in the side of the head. “It isn't so unusual for new conditions to overwrite old ones. You might have known that if there hadn't been two discussions happening at the same time. In the future, don't slack on getting everyone on the same page. This contract made Dunkelfelger believe that we cared more about taking Lady Hannelore as a second wife than putting a stop to their pressure, which caused them to make other misassumptions about what would appeal to us.”

It was true in both the world of nobles and the world of merchants that written agreements held more weight than mere verbal ones—and that was precisely why Dunkelfelger had assumed our desires based on the terms of our contract. That their assumptions had been off base was entirely our own fault.

Gaaah! I feel terrible!

Just thinking of what I'd said to Sieglinde a moment ago made me wish the earth would swallow me up. She was the first wife of Dunkelfelger, yet I'd been so incredibly rude to her. I genuinely wished I could wipe her memory of our entire conversation.

“Please, allow me to apologize from the bottom of my heart,” I

said. "I should not have been so rude or tried to make demands that are not a part of our contract."

"It seems we misunderstood the nature of the agreement," Sylvester added. "I apologize for having failed to confirm all of the relevant details."

"No, no," Sieglinde replied. "There is no need for that. Ehrenfest is unfamiliar with bride-taking ditter, so we should have done more to explain and oversee the process ourselves. The blame lies primarily with us, therefore we are the ones who must apologize."

In the end, she apologized for Lestilaut having tried to cancel my engagement, which already had the king's approval; for Hannelore having failed to rein in the Dunkelfelger men, who were always prone to losing their heads over ditter; and for not having explained the customs exclusive to her duchy.

"Hannelore, you will need to reflect on this as well," Sieglinde continued. "I am pleased that you did not forget to apologize to Lady Rozemyne, even when you were feeling so down about your future being wagered, but you must never let the men out of your sight when ditter is involved. Lestilaut always goes to great lengths to secure a dominant position, and the knights become easily excitable. It was your job to keep them under control and to ensure that Ehrenfest understood what they were getting into. Carve all this into your mind if you treasure your friendships." A smile crept onto her face. "After all this, I should think you have a better understanding of what it means to be a Dunkelfelger woman."

Hannelore's expression froze in a smile. For a moment, I thought she was going to put herself down, but then she nodded and said, "I will take more care going forward."

Sieglinde returned her attention to Sylvester and me. "Now, Ehrenfest, would you care to explain what you wanted from this game of ditter? If you do not wish to take Hannelore as a second wife, then we can resolve this here and now." She glanced over at Dunkelfelger's spot in the arena. "Preferably before my husband tries to interfere and claim that 'the results of ditter cannot be overturned.'"

Sylvester sat up straight. "Our primary wish is for Dunkelfelger to cease its attempts to secure Rozemyne through marriage. On a more personal note, I would also ask that your duchy stop challenging us to ditter, bride-taking or otherwise." Their demands to play had become something of a yearly occurrence, and it was putting a considerable burden on Ehrenfest. "We had no choice but to participate this time around, and we ended up expending many of our magic tools and rejuvenation potions. We cannot allow this to continue; Ehrenfest is only a middle duchy, after all."

"I suppose the challenges *have* come rather frequently... I shall do

whatever I can to ensure that you do not receive another. I would also advise that you stop immediately accepting them. Once an agreement to play has been made, there is no way for me to help.”

Because we kept accepting Dunkelfelger’s requests to play treasure-stealing ditler, they had started to believe that we genuinely enjoyed it. Rauffen’s reports had apparently even said, “Lady Rozemyne may be too sickly to take the knight course, but she loves treasure-stealing ditler just like Lord Ferdinand did.”

That isn’t accurate at all!

“Lady Rozemyne, do you have any reasons to disagree with Aub Ehrenfest’s proposition?”

“Ehrenfest contains that which is precious to me,” I replied earnestly. “Thus, I will never choose to leave it, even when my heart may waver in the face of very tempting offers.”

Sieglinde’s expression softened a little. “Hannelore, do you know of anything that Ehrenfest would desire to have?”

“Mother?”

“We have spent years bothering Ehrenfest with our one-sided requests to play ditler, have we not? We will need to make up for that if we wish to maintain a positive relationship between our two duchies. Consider this an apology not to Lady Rozemyne specifically but to all of Ehrenfest.”

Hannelore thought for a moment, then clapped her hands together. “What if we have Lestilaut provide them with some art? It, erm... seemed to me that both Lady Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried wanted his illustrations for *A Ditter Story*—but he did not like the idea of someone else altering his work, so it has remained in our possession. We could contribute to Ehrenfest’s printing by offering them those illustrations to do with as they please.” She observed Sieglinde’s reaction as she spoke, her red eyes sparkling with pride. It made sense that she was so lively considering her previous mention that nobody ever asked for her opinion or heeded her advice.

“Hmm... But will that really please Ehrenfest?”

I looked from Sieglinde’s dubious expression to Hannelore’s hopeful smile, then immediately responded with a firm nod. “It will! Lady Hannelore has just put forward a wonderful suggestion that will dramatically increase sales of our book. Isn’t that right, Aub Ehrenfest?” I was as ecstatic as Hannelore, but Sylvester just rubbed his forehead.

“Don’t be stupid,” he murmured to me. “There’s gotta be something worth more than that. At least ask for Dunkelfelger’s protection or something.”

“Ah yes...” Sieglinde said, suddenly wearing a more calculating smile. “I almost forgot that Lady Rozemyne destroyed one of our

duchy's ancient treasures."

In the blink of an eye, Sylvester agreed that Lestilaut's art would suffice.

"We greatly appreciate having Lord Lestilaut's illustrations, but can we really use them without his permission?" I asked.

Sieglinde nodded. "I would say this is an excellent opportunity for him to learn how it feels to have a matter related to you be decided without your involvement. In fact, after he gambled Hannelore's hand in marriage without her approval, I do not believe it is enough. I shall give you one of his paintings as well." She gave a refined giggle. "There is a piece in the dormitory that he put a tremendous amount of effort into, and I believe it will do nicely."

Ah. The anger in her smile really reminds me of Ferdinand. Good luck, Lord Lestilaut.

Our conversation about ditter had come to an end, and from there we moved on to discussing the printing industry. Various questions were asked about how many copies of the history book and *A Ditter Story* we intended to prepare, how we were going to sell them, and so on. I provided answers to them all.

"We would like to print our own books one day," Sieglinde said. "To that end, if you are willing to sell to us, we are interested in buying the magic tool you use in Ehrenfest."

"I am afraid we cannot do that," I replied. After all, printing presses weren't magic tools to begin with.

"I expected as much. Lestilaut informed us in his reports that you are keeping the technology a secret to prevent it from spreading. I imagine you intend to maintain private ownership while developing the industry internally?"

It was standard practice for duchies in our position to sell their technologies to the Sovereignty or a greater duchy so they could spread from the top down. As such, Sieglinde was curious to know why Ehrenfest was keeping its knowledge to itself. She punctuated her question with a brief remark that our duchy's actions "could not be understood using common sense," which was potentially my fault.

"We have decided to accept manuscripts from other duchies and print them within Ehrenfest for the time being. Only once it has become a familiar part of our culture will we start spreading it beyond our borders."

At the moment, Ehrenfest's nobles were still getting used to all the ins and outs of printing. Only once they understood copyright laws and the cash flow of the industry would we start expanding to other duchies.

Sylvester nodded in agreement with my response, then gave a smile to Sieglinde.

“This is speaking of the future, but when we *do* decide to spread printing to other duchies, I promise to approach Dunkelfelger first.”

“I see. Then I shall eagerly await that day. Incidentally... I have been rather curious about this book of yours, *The Story of Fernestine*. The first volume seems to indicate that the heroine was based on you—and that you are being abused in Ehrenfest.”

Despite the seriousness of the accusation, Sylvester knew whom the protagonist was *actually* based on, so he had to very casually cover his mouth to stifle his laughter.

Sieglinde continued, “It is well known that you have been gathering stories in the Royal Academy and allowing other students to borrow your books, and many have begun to wonder if this is your own, very discreet way of calling for help. It does not help that so few of the rumors spread about Ehrenfest during the Archduke Conference were positive. Dunkelfelger already went on a rampage to save Lord Ferdinand, and now I must keep a firm grip on the reins to ensure that the same error is not committed in an attempt to save you.”

I’m very grateful for that, but...

For obvious reasons, I couldn’t reveal that the story was really based on Ferdinand—and I *definitely* couldn’t reveal that the author, Elvira, was using it as an outlet for how she felt about him being sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

“I expect that reading the second volume will eradicate any such thoughts,” I said, “so I will make sure to always include it when lending others the first. I thank you ever so much for your considerate warning.”

“Many will surely rejoice over that fact,” Hannelore replied. “I was in agony when I realized the first volume ended midway through the story. I cannot wait to see how it concludes.” She was being very generous with her praise of our books, and it was obvious how eagerly she was anticipating the next one.

But as I thought about what she had said, something occurred to me: I had never told her that *The Story of Fernestine* was actually *three* volumes long. It was time to break the bad news to her.

“Um, Lady Hannelore... *The Story of Fernestine* actually ends with the *third* volume, not the second.”

“Th-That can’t be...” Hannelore choked, her hands pressed against her cheeks in despair.

Socializing with Ahrensbach

Hannelore was visibly torn, unable to decide whether she should give in and read the next volume as soon as possible or wait until the last volume was complete. Meanwhile, Dunkelfelger's first wife moved on to discussing sales methods with Sylvester.

From what I've heard, the Interduchy Tournament is treated as a prelude of sorts to the Archduke Conference... so I guess this is what the actual conference is like.

I turned my attention to the surrounding scholars when a sudden cheery voice pulled me from my thoughts: "You all appear to be having such fun, so I do apologize, but I must interject."

It was Detlinde, with Ferdinand in tow.

The corner of Sylvester's lips twitched into a partial smile at the arrival of none other than "Ferneistine" himself. This was usually when Ferdinand would ask, "What are you plotting?" but he just stayed silent, maintaining a fake smile while standing half a step behind Detlinde.

He looks so... so sick! Geez!

His face was pallid, and it was clear at a glance that he was sleep-deprived. Not even his fake smile was properly masking his true feelings; he looked angry beneath the surface, which was probably because Detlinde had done something to offend him.

Detlinde continued in a droning voice, "I must greet each duchy with my fiancé. Oh, I am just so terribly, terribly busy... How convenient that Dunkelfelger's first wife is here."

Aah... Ferdinand just smiled even wider.

Detlinde began speaking with Sieglinde and Hannelore, ignoring Sylvester and me completely. She was asking about our joint research.

"Your research with Ehrenfest is exceedingly interesting and appears to have drawn much interest... but Ahrensbach's research spearheaded by the disciple of my fiancé Lord Ferdinand is wonderful as well. Do have a look."

Ferdinand shot her a glance, leaving his thoughts about her shameless advertising unspoken, then started approaching Sylvester and me. I sped over to meet him halfway—after gaining Sylvester's approval to stand and while taking care to remain elegant, of course.

"Ferdinand, it's been so long— Ow, ow, owie!"

For some unknown reason, he had pinched my cheeks the very

instant I was within his reach. I rubbed my cheeks and stared up at him, teary-eyed at the pain I had almost forgotten... only to notice that his fake smile had vanished entirely. He was now looking down at me with chilly eyes, his brow tightly knit.

Why is he so furious?! I avoided reporting anything that would make him mad, didn't I?!

"There is a mountain of things I wish to say to you," he remarked, "but I will refrain for now."

"Then refrain from pinching my cheeks as well, please."

"Hm. I will consider your input later."

"Don't *consider* it; *conform* to it," I shot back with a glare, but Ferdinand just sniffed dismissively. I could sense I wasn't going to be free from danger anytime soon.

"We decided to come over when we saw Dunkelfelger," Ferdinand said. "Do you have the cape?"

"Of course."

I turned to Rihyarda, who immediately presented the cape. Ferdinand took it, then headed over to the knights standing at the ready behind Sieglinde and said, "Could you call over Heisshitze?"

One of the knights sent off an ordonnanz, and barely a moment passed before Heisshitze rushed over. He looked so very excited, even though there was zero chance of them playing any ditter.

"Lord Ferdinand, congratulations on your engagement. I was overjoyed to hear that you have been freed from the temple. In fact, I must admit, I was the one who proposed your union and convinced the Zent to enforce it."

You did the most unnecessary thing anyone has ever done! was what I wanted to cry out. Instead, I merely forced a smile, taking care not to let my anger show.

Ferdinand was likewise wearing a very gentle grin as he replied, "Ah, yes. I am told that Dunkelfelger and many others worked together to grant me the greatest reprieve imaginable. It is thanks to all of your efforts that I am now engaged to Lady Detlinde, Lady Veronica's granddaughter. The emotions I feel truly cannot be put into words."

"Oh my, Lord Ferdinand," Detlinde said shyly. "You always shower me with such praise."

The others all started offering their congratulations as well, but Heisshitze just froze. His skin had turned ashen, and there was a marked change in his expression.

He must know. He knows that Ferdinand was abused by Lady Veronica.

I continued to focus on Heisshitze, the one stony face among all the knights. I was familiar enough with Ferdinand to know that he'd

never tell anyone else about his abuse. It was possible that Heissshitze had found out about it through Justus or Eckhart, or maybe even Hirschur. At the very least, the news had surely come from someone close to Ferdinand—from one of the select few people who were in the know.

“As my duty is now to support Lady Detlinde in Ahrensbach, I am no longer in a position to play ditto with you,” Ferdinand said. “Thus, I shall return this. I cannot wait forever.”

“This is...” Heissshitze looked from Ferdinand, who was wearing a bright smile, to the blue cape that was being so deliberately pushed into his hands. He was in a daze; it must have occurred to him why Ferdinand was going out of his way to return the cape now, when he hadn’t upon entering the temple.

“Isn’t this great?” one of the knights said to Heissshitze, clapping him on the back. “I know how much that cape means to you.”

“Your wife’s gonna be over the moon,” another said, grinning.

Little did they know. Heissshitze had turned ghastly pale.

Ferdinand smiled at his friend, whose face had gone stiff. “You have finally reacquired the cape that was stolen from you all those years ago. I would expect a little more delight, Heissshitze.” His last words sounded so cold that they almost came across as an order—like, “Be as ecstatic as you were over my engagement.”

Heissshitze cast his eyes down, squeezing the cape in his fists, then put on a tremulous smile. “I never thought I would regain this cape in such a way. My wife will... truly be overjoyed.” He finally understood that, though he had meant well, he had put his friend in the worst situation possible. Ferdinand had even demanded that he act jovially without allowing him an opportunity to apologize.

Before the two could exchange another word, someone got between them. “Oh my! And why did Lord Ferdinand have a cape so precious to that man?” Detlinde asked. She was looking up at Heissshitze, her eyes sparkling with wonder, entirely oblivious to the tension in the air.

The surrounding knights battled to explain, until eventually...

“And so, ever since their days at the Royal Academy, Heissshitze has been battling to retrieve his cape.”

“My!” Detlinde exclaimed. “How cruel, taking a cape embroidered by one’s bride-to-be! I did not think Lord Ferdinand was capable of such coldness.” She had taken the knights’ humor very seriously indeed, which made them all swallow hard and forced them to correct themselves.

“Er, actually... Lord Ferdinand offered to return it, but Heissshitze insisted that it be won back through ditto.”

To the knights, Heissshitze’s situation was probably a regular

source of amusement, but most other people couldn't empathize with the idea of gambling a precious gift from one's partner on a game of *ditter*.

"Still," Detlinde muttered, "to have the cape you put your heart into embroidering be stolen away like that..."

"It's fine. A man of Dunkelfelger would never give up the fight to retrieve it."

I wasn't sure whether "fine" was the right word, but the knights swiftly moved on to explain the so-called "romance of *ditter*" to Detlinde. Ferdinand took a casual step back, leaving his fiancée in their hands, and returned to the table—whereupon he apologized to Sylvester for causing a fuss, then greeted Sieglinde and Hannelore.

"Lord Ferdinand, if you will," Brunhilde said. She had prepared a seat and some tea and sweets for him the instant she saw that Detlinde was busy. Sylvester's tea and sweets were refreshed at the same time, then he partook of them both.

Ferdinand took a sip of tea himself and then said, "Aah, the flavor of Ehrenfest..." From the earnestness in his voice, I could gather that the varieties he had access to in Ahrensbach were very different.

We had also prepared some of the tea-leaf pound cake that Ferdinand enjoyed so much, but he immediately handed it down to his retainers. "Justus, Eckhart, you have also gone a long time without the flavors of your home. Here." He must have wanted them to get all the rest they could while they were in Ehrenfest's space and could relax.

"We thank you," they both replied as they accepted the plates and retreated a step.

Ferdinand sipped from his cup again, his guard knight from Ahrensbach still at attention behind him, then looked at Sieglinde. "Moments ago, I observed Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger's joint research, and I must say—I am surprised that such an old ceremony remains in your duchy to this day. I consider it wonderful that the research has resulted in students obtaining more divine protections."

I could only blink in surprise. "But, Lord Ferdinand, Professor Rauffen was teaching when you were a student. Did you really not know about Dunkelfelger's ritual...?"

Ferdinand replied with a simple "I did not," at which point Hannelore stepped in to explain.

"I only learned this over the course of our research, but Professor Rauffen did not begin teaching the ritual until another professor of the knight course retired and he was put in charge."

"It is like a dance known by all those of the current generation, in every duchy," Ferdinand said. "The adult knights visiting are saying they wish to learn it, as it might help with feybeast hunting as well."

Perhaps this will further strengthen Dunkelfelger's influence."

Sylvester nodded. "Ehrenfest would similarly like to learn it before next year's Lord of Winter hunt." Our knights had apparently tried it out after we informed them about it, but they hadn't managed to get the blessings. It made sense that they would need more time; most of the knights serving as our primary firepower had needed to start by learning how to actually do this dance.

"Even in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, the success rate of the ritual is only eighty-some percent," Sieglinde explained. "The adults of our duchy have largely succeeded with it, and we expect that the outcome has to do with the amount of mana offered during the ritual."

It seemed that even those in Dunkelfelger had started performing the ritual for blessings after learning about it from the Royal Academy. This had resulted in *many* ditter matches, as well as an incident wherein their aub led a band of knights into the temple, hoping to touch the divine instruments so as to learn to recreate them with their schtappes and make their mana offering more efficient.

"I extend my sympathies to those of your temple," Ferdinand said. "I assume you sympathize with them as well, Rozemyne. They must have been busy with their Dedication Ritual, after all."

I tried to put myself in the shoes of Dunkelfelger's High Bishop. Their temple had been completely ignored by the nobles, only for the aub and a crowd of knights to suddenly demand the divine instruments partway through the Dedication Ritual. With the stress that had no doubt caused them, I was surprised they hadn't climbed the towering stairway to the distant heights.

"That truly was a time of great conflict for me," Sieglinde said, a distant look in her eyes. "I was almost struck with the urge to resent you, Lady Rozemyne."

I'm sorry. I'm really, truly sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen... I thought, offering silent apologies both to Sieglinde and to Dunkelfelger's High Bishop, wherever they were.

Ferdinand shot me a glare. "And what did Rozemyne do to earn that ire, might I ask?"

"Eep! I, um..."

My mind went blank, but Hannelore swiftly came to my defense. "Lady Rozemyne did nothing wrong. It was simply a case of our duchy losing control."

I was so moved that I wanted to hug her—but my relief was painfully short-lived.

"In fact, it is thanks to Lady Rozemyne's accomplishments that Dunkelfelger learned to obtain such blessings in the first place. She mimicked our ritual, which was but a shadow of its intended form at the time, and offered mana with Leidenschaft's spear, causing a pillar

of light to shoot up into the sky. The resultant blessings were so powerful that we immediately began striving to return the ritual to its true state.”

Noooo! Lady Hannelore, stoppp! I... I can't take the look Ferdinand is giving me! It's terrifying!

“Oh...?” Ferdinand replied, curious. “Rozemyne did not include such details in her letters. I see now that she played a significant part in all this.”

“That’s right. The Dedication Ritual she performed was wondrous as well. Even the Zent was overjoyed after participating.”

Please. I'm already dead.

I had gone out of my way to write only innocuous details about the Dedication Ritual, so I really didn’t want her giving Ferdinand more reasons to be mad at me before dinner.

“F-Ferdinand!” I cried. “You have to greet *every single duchy* here today, correct?! You must be so, so busy! It would be a shame to keep you here any longer, so please—”

“Fear not, Rozemyne. Lady Detlinde is still speaking with the knights, so I am obligated to stay. More importantly, I would like to know more about what you have been doing. There seems to be a great deal that was not mentioned in your letters.”

I could tell from the look in his eyes that he *knew* how much I was hiding from him, and the blood drained from my face as he sought more information from Sylvester and Hannelore. The former had received my uncensored reports on the incidents in question, and the latter had actually been there for most of them.

This is bad... Someone, save me!

“So, what are you all discussing?” Detlinde asked as she came over to the table. Her conversation with the knights had evidently concluded.

Hannelore smiled and gave an honest answer. The very instant Detlinde heard the words “joint research,” her dark-green eyes began to shine.

“Ahrensbach’s research was performed by Lord Ferdinand’s disciple and started with an attempt to make the library’s magic tools as mana-efficient as possible. You see, after the civil war, the task of supplying the library’s tools was left entirely to Professor Solange, a mednoble, who could not manage on her own. The research has garnered much attention from the royal family due to its use in preserving documents.”

That's almost word for word what my report said, except it's missing the most important part—that the research is absolutely essential for any individual who wants to maintain a library on their own.

“Please excuse me, Lady Detlinde, but we were discussing our

joint research with Ehrenfest,” Sieglinde said. She was making it pretty clear that *none of us* had asked about Ahrensbach.

Detlinde’s eyes widened. “Oh my! Lord Ferdinand, I *must* ask that you properly explain Ahrensbach’s research. You cannot be so slack.”

Er, what...?

We were all taken aback when Detlinde, who was supposed to be “so terribly, terribly busy” greeting all the duchies, urged Ehrenfest’s apprentice attendants to prepare a seat for her. She then joined us around the table and began bragging about Ahrensbach’s joint research.

“So, to continue—we improved upon the magic tools for recording voices, and then I received the most wonderful surprise! Such tender words of love were whispered straight into my ear. Ohohoho!”

Yeah, words of love from a stuffed shumil.

I made sure to keep my little remark to myself, but Sieglinde did not hesitate to speak her mind. “Should you not be referring to it as your joint research with Ehrenfest? Trying to withhold credit would appear quite unscrupulous.”

“Oh, but the research was all done by a disciple of my fiancé, Lord Ferdinand. That makes it equivalent to Ahrensbach’s research, does it not?”

Sieglinde gave me a subtly troubled smile as if to ask, “Is this your research being stolen?” She was presumably wondering what was going on—and after we had already been so firm with Dunkelfelger, we couldn’t just let Ahrensbach walk all over us.

I smiled back at Sieglinde. “If you wish to know how Ehrenfest’s joint research with Ahrensbach developed, I would recommend you see it for yourself. My apprentice knights and attendants worked very hard on it.”

“Not your apprentice scholars...? This *is* joint research, correct?” Sieglinde asked, now looking even more confused.

Under normal circumstances, it was the apprentice scholars who performed the research presented at the Interduchy Tournament. In our case, however, Lieseleta had turned the magic tool into a cute stuffed animal, and Laurenz had provided the voice recording.

“Cute shumils are the symbol of Ehrenfest,” I said.

“Ah, that reminds me!” Detlinde called out, clapping her hands together. “There is something I wish to ask of Lord Ferdinand.”

Ferdinand had stopped paying attention to Detlinde at some point during her insufferable bragging and was instead asking various questions of Sylvester and Hannelore. After his fiancée called out to him, however, he had no choice but to turn back to us and say, “Yes?” with a smile.

“As I requested previously, I desire that shumil for my own,”

Detlinde announced. "Both you and Raimund said it belonged to Lady Rozemyne, yes? Then use this opportunity to have her give it to me. You will grant my wish, yes?"

All eyes fell on Detlinde. She wanted the love-whispering shumil. And after being refused once already by Raimund and Ferdinand, she had decided to try again.

"That is the prototype that Ehrenfest prepared, correct?" Sieglinde asked, dubiously.

I gave a firm nod to clear up any misunderstandings, then looked at Detlinde. "My sincerest apologies, but the shumil is already spoken for." I was planning to give it to Letizia after the demonstration, so I didn't want anyone asking for it.

"Then I will negotiate with whoever is due to receive it," Detlinde said, unwilling to back down. "Tell me, who might this person be?"

"Um, Lady Detlinde..." Hannelore said, her voice quavering a little. "Could you not simply have your attendants make you one of your own?"

"Or do you mean to say that nobody in Ahrensbach can make the product of your own research?" Sieglinde asked.

Detlinde averted her eyes, then pridefully stuck out her chin. "I would make such a request for a normal stuffed animal, but this is a magic tool, and an exhibition item at that. Lady Rozemyne took the rights and schematics from Raimund before I, Ahrensbach's next aub, could even react. Although it may be joint research, it was highly troubling for her to have done such a thing without a word of consultation."

"I did *not* take them from Raimund," I protested. Holding my tongue would have made her twisted interpretation of events the truth. "I paid him in full and through the proper channels. Plus, the person responsible for the research is free to decide what they do with it; they do not need the permission of an aub, let alone a *future* aub."

Sieglinde was looking very displeased.

Ferdinand, upon seeing everyone's reaction, adopted an especially sweet smile. "Lady Detlinde, if that toy has already been promised to someone, then asking for it will only trouble everyone." It was a rather courteous way of telling her to read the room and stop being so selfish, but Detlinde, completely oblivious to his intentions, shot him a dissatisfied glare.

"Lord Ferdinand, I am saying that I desire this shumil. If you are my fiancé, then at least *try* to grant my wish."

"If your wish is to have an identical magic tool, then I promise to make you one after I obtain a workshop in Ahrensbach. Rozemyne, my apologies, but can you send me the schematics when that time comes?"

So, in other words: "If you want that magic tool, give me a workshop already."

I gave a smile in support. Ferdinand may have *seemed* as though he was caving to Detlinde's selfishness, but he actually had his own interests at heart.

"Of course," I replied. "Lady Detlinde, do contact me once Lord Ferdinand has a workshop. I will send the schematics by letter without delay."

"Oh my..." Hannelore said. "How wonderful it must be to have your fiancé go to such lengths to make you a gift. I cannot contain my envy." She was trying to settle the topic with a smile, but Detlinde just shook her head.

"Lord Ferdinand will obtain a workshop only after the Starbinding. That is terribly far away. I desire the shumil *now*, before anyone else obtains one. Lady Rozemyne already has the schematics, so can she not simply make another?"

And with that, our budding resolution was swiftly torn to shreds. Ferdinand sighed, tapping a finger against his forehead, while Sieglinde and Hannelore exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Lady Detlinde, do you always make such demands of Ehrenfest?" Sieglinde asked.

"But of course. I *am* the next aub of Ahrensbach, you know."

Sieglinde placed a hand on her forehead, Ferdinand raised an eyebrow, and Sylvester shrugged. Meanwhile, Lieseleta crouched down behind me and whispered quietly enough that only I could hear her.

"Lady Rozemyne, might I suggest offering the exhibit shumil to Lady Detlinde? I will simply make another."

"Lieseleta..."

"It hurts to see Lord Ferdinand so troubled, does it not?"

I nodded. Making another shumil wasn't something I could do myself, but with Lieseleta so generously offering her assistance, giving in to Detlinde and saving Ferdinand the headache was the best approach.

"You may have it once the Interduchy Tournament is complete," I said. "As you say, we can simply make another."

"Oh my!" Detlinde replied, raising her voice in delight. "How splendid."

"Apologies, Rozemyne," Ferdinand added.

I shook my head. "This is nothing for you to worry about, Lord Ferdinand. My attendant is skilled with her hands and is willing to create a new one."

"However..."

Ferdinand pulled a face, but I didn't think there was anything else

I could do. I was racking my brain, trying to make sure there was nothing I'd overlooked, when Hannelore gave me a smile.

"I have yet to see this shumil myself, but perhaps it will become a new Ehrenfest trend."

She was trying to ease the tension in the air.

"Certainly," Sieglinde said with a nod, also smiling. "And one cannot speak of Ehrenfest trends without thinking of hair ornaments. Will you be wearing one, Lady Detlinde? I saw the ornament that Lestilaut ordered this morning. It was truly wonderful."

"Naturally. Lord Ferdinand has gifted me some. I intend to show them to everyone during tomorrow's graduation ceremony, so please look forward to it. Wearing them today would have ruined the surprise."

I don't think it should be a "surprise" to begin with...

"I shall be attending the graduation ceremony in clothes fit for a future aub," Detlinde continued, puffing out her chest with pride—but before she could say anything else, an ordonnanz arrived. There were so many of us here that it was impossible to tell who it was for at first glance, so we all presented our arms... and it landed on mine.

"LADY ROZEMYNE!" came Fraularm's loud, shrieking voice, so piercing that it made me want to cover my ears. "What is the meaning of this... this... Ehrenfest plot?! There was no mention of your exhibit containing such an unacceptable message! You intentionally deceived Ahrensbach, didn't you?!"

The ordonnanz repeated Fraularm's rant twice more, but I didn't have a clue what she was referring to.

"Did you slack on some report?" Ferdinand asked.

"No, I am quite sure I gave her every relevant detail... I wonder what happened."

"Um, Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta said, "may I have your permission to speak?"

I granted it, and she looked once at Ahrensbach's spot. "This is just an assumption, but, erm... perhaps they are referring to the final message we recorded. As the shumil was brought for the exhibition just this morning, Professor Fraularm might not have listened all the way through to the end."

"And what was this final message?" Ferdinand asked. "Raimund explained the tool to me this morning, and I was simply exasperated to hear that it has been filled with such fool—*strange* messages."

After hearing that the shumil was full of romantic phrases and contained ten messages in total, Ferdinand had apparently decided not to waste his mana on listening to them all.

"Each phrase was handpicked from *Royal Academy Love Stories*," I explained, "so I decided to make the final message an advertisement

for the book and for Ehrenfest books in general.”

“An advertisement?”

I repeated the message as I remembered it, and immediately Detlinde’s eyebrows shot up. “For such an advertisement to come from Ahrensbach’s exhibition... If you will excuse me, I must take my leave! There are still many duchies for us to greet! Let us go, Lord Ferdinand.”

She hurried away in a daze. I was wondering why Ahrensbach hadn’t checked all of the messages to begin with when Ferdinand stood up and chuckled.

“So an advertisement for Ehrenfest books played while Ahrensbach was so openly and consistently bragging about the tool being their own research... Good grief, Rozemyne. You truly are unpredictable.” He placed a hand on my head and, before turning to leave, said, “Very good.”

Socializing with Royalty

The advertisement I recorded on an absentminded whim had earned me such extreme words of praise from Ferdinand, by complete accident.

VERY good, he said. Eheheheh.

I took a moment to savor my elation, recalling the subtle smile that Ferdinand had given and the feeling of his hand on my head.

“You seem very pleased, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said. She was resting a hand on her cheek and giving me a very strange look.

“Mm-hmm. I received none other than a ‘very good’ from Ferdinand. That is the highest praise possible, which I had received previously only after having everyone in the dormitory pass their written lessons on the first day or after finishing all of my classes as quickly as possible without letting any of my grades drop. I was sure that, after his move to Ahrensbach, I would only ever receive his praise by letter, so this is truly a pleasant surprise.”

I expected to hear a heartwarming “I am so very pleased for you” in response, but both Sieglinde’s and Hannelore’s expressions stiffened.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No, I am just... taken aback by the exceeding harshness of his education...” Sieglinde said with a troubled smile, having struggled to even get the words out. Personally, I wasn’t taken aback at all—frequent exposure had made me well accustomed to what Ferdinand was like. Still, it seemed that his teaching methods weren’t “very good” but rather “very harsh.”

Oh, wait... are they thinking I was abused again?!

“U-Um, his education may *come across* as harsh, but it really is nothing once you get used to it,” I said. “By the end of our time together, before he moved to Ahrensbach, he was even giving me new books each time I completed a task he gave me. In truth, Ferdinand is a very kind person.”

He’s a bit harsh, but not scary.

But as I tried to paint Ferdinand in the best possible light, Sylvester cackled and waved me away. “Those books were always related to the next task he intended to give you. You’re just about the only person who’s been able to keep up with him, Rozemyne.”

What?! He used to give me a book after I completed a hands-on task

and tell me to finish it by the next day—or else I'd receive an extra task to do. I always thought they were rewards, but they were the extra tasks all along?!

I widened my eyes in shock at this revelation, and it was then that I noticed a group of black-capes heading in our direction. Anastasius was leading them, but Eglantine was nowhere to be seen. She probably had work to complete as a professor, which was kind of sad.

“Oh my,” Sieglinde said. “I see the royal family is coming. We have concluded our greetings, so if you will excuse us...” She and Hannelore stood up to make way for our new guests, but Anastasius raised a hand to stop them before they could take their leave.

“Hold,” he said. “I also have words for the first wife of Dunkelfelger.”

Left with no other choice, Sieglinde and Hannelore both sat back down at the circular table, after which Anastasius joined us. He had Sylvester to his right and Sieglinde to his left, while I had Sylvester to my left and Hannelore to my right.

“Rozemyne, my apologies, but can you make that shield of Wind?” Anastasius asked. “We will also be using a sound-blocking magic tool on the immediate area. Everyone, stand down.”

He got his attendants to prepare the magic tool while I formed Schutzaria's shield. Nobody was forced out, which meant there was no need to worry about anyone harboring any malice or having any bad intentions—but Anastasius still instructed the attendants and guard knights to leave once the tea and sweets had been prepared.

“The guard knights as well?” I confirmed.

“Yes. I expect you can all imagine why.”

He surely wanted to discuss the Sovereign knights who had interfered in our recent ditter game. We had all given proper reports, so Sieglinde and Sylvester understood this as well. They assented, and their retainers stood down.

Once we were alone, Sieglinde was the first to speak. “You are showing quite a lot of caution. What do you wish to discuss?”

Anastasius looked from Sieglinde to Sylvester. “First, I intend to air my grievances about Rozemyne and Hannelore to you two, their guardians. I have warned them countless times, but I see no improvement. It was only through great restraint that I was able to wait until the Interduchy Tournament and did not summon you to the Royal Academy sooner. I saw you all gathered after finishing my discussion with Klassenberg and came at once to seize this perfect opportunity.”

So... this is basically a parent-teacher meeting for two problem children? Oh, that reminds me—there was a summons like this after the tennisbefallen incident. Ferdinand came as my guardian back then instead

of Sylvester. *How nostalgic.*

That had only been last year, but so much had happened since that it felt like ancient history. A wistful smile crept onto my face—but then I noticed that Sylvester, Sieglinde, and Hannelore were all watching Anastasius with very serious expressions. I was reacting to our situation in entirely the wrong way, so I quickly tried to look more solemn.

“As I expect you all know,” Anastasius continued, “Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger have been causing far too many problems. Although parents are meant to encourage the younger generation’s growth by not interfering in matters of the Royal Academy, I must ask: Can you really do nothing about this? Rozemyne, Hannelore—major problems have occurred every single year since you became students, and each seems greater and more severe than the last.”

He explained that, before Hannelore and I joined the Academy, there hadn’t been any conflict between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger, and there *certainly* hadn’t been any large-scale battles involving the cooperation of numerous duchies. Ehrenfest also hadn’t shot up the rankings out of the blue, so it hadn’t been on such bad terms with the lesser and other middle duchies.

“Prince Anastasius, may I ask something?” I said.

“What is it?” he replied, though his gray eyes were very blatantly telling me not to interrupt.

“Your mention of a newly developed conflict between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger—are you referring to our ditter games?”

“What else?”

“I don’t agree that either of us should take the blame for those.”

“Rozemyne, don’t argue with royalty,” Sylvester cut in without a moment’s hesitation, looking well and truly freaked out. But I just shook my head.

“Aub Ehrenfest, whether we are in the presence of the royal family or a greater duchy, we must state our position if we wish to be understood. Staying silent will only breed misconceptions, from which negative rumors will spread. We should clear the air before that can happen, and while it may not be obvious”—I turned my eyes on all those present—“I *am* being considerate of the people I am speaking with.”

“It certainly doesn’t seem like it!” Sylvester pretty much yelped. “You’re sitting before Dunkelfelger and a member of the royal family!”

“Correct. Prince Anastasius, of all people, should understand the importance of clear communication; after all, it was his reluctance to express his feelings directly that kept Lady Eglantine from truly understanding his heart. And as for Lady Sieglinde, I think our previous conversation outlined the importance of exchanging

information ahead of time.”

Sylvester’s and my bases may have been quite different, but I obviously wouldn’t be this frank with just anyone; I was taking care only to speak so frankly to those whom I expected would understand. Of course, there was always a chance I was operating on false principles.

“Rozemyne, even if you have a firm basis for your argument, you should take a moment to consider our duchy’s position in Yurgenschmidt,” Sylvester warned.

“Hm? Prince Anastasius has excluded our retainers specifically because he wants our honest opinions, no?” I gestured to the sound-blocking magic tool and Schutzaria’s shield. “If we were expected to know our places and sit in silence, then he would not have made these preparations.”

Anastasius grimaced as if trying to endure an immense headache, then gave Sylvester a look of pure sympathy. “Aub Ehrenfest—I understand what you must be feeling all too well. However, Rozemyne is correct that I wish to hear your honest opinions. So, Rozemyne... why should we not blame you or Hannelore for the conflict between your duchies?”

“Because neither one of us has *ever* expressed a desire to play ditter. Isn’t that right, Lady Hannelore?”

Hannelore recoiled upon hearing her name, then nodded over and over again. “Yes. I did not want to play ditter.”

“You recall what happened when I was a first-year, do you not, Prince Anastasius? Lord Lestilaut sought me out because he wished to acquire Schwartz and Weiss for his duchy. Then, it was *Professor Rauffen* who said we could resolve the matter through ditter, was it not?”

We had played ditter again when I was a second-year, but that was Aub Dunkelfelger’s fault. He had stubbornly maintained that we would need to play against them during the Interduchy Tournament if we wanted the rights to print Dunkelfelger’s history book, which had ultimately resulted in a duel between Ferdinand and Heissshitze. Those printing rights were important to me, so I was glad we’d secured them in the end, but I would have much rather resolved the issue verbally.

And of course, this year, Lestilaut had gotten in my face and demanded that I cancel my engagement—even though it had already received the king’s approval. He had even threatened to use Dunkelfelger’s influence as a top-ranking greater duchy to pressure our aub if we refused.

“If you wish to blame someone, then blame the men of Dunkelfelger for using their position to twist my arm,” I concluded. “Lady Hannelore and I have been helplessly swept along from the very

beginning.”

Anastasius gave Sieglinde an indescribable look before turning back to me. “Refuse any such requests next time,” he said weakly.

“I will. In the past, I was following the advice I was given to never defy the top-ranking duchies, but Lady Sieglinde has given me her permission to refuse any further dinner requests. You may rest assured—Ehrenfest will never play again.”

I puffed out my chest and smiled at Sylvester, expecting him to be just as pleased about this development, but he was frozen in place with his hands on his head. It made no sense; we had permission from the royal family to refuse any future dinner games!

“Furthermore,” I continued, still addressing Anastasius, “I wish to put forward a request not just for Ehrenfest but for *every* low-ranking duchy. Please be more considerate before you allow the training grounds to be used for dinner. If you grant a request without looking into *why* the match is being held, then some may find themselves unable to refuse. It would be more beneficial for you to consult both duchies before the game rather than just arbitrating and censuring both parties after the fact.”

Dunkelfelger would prepare the location, overenthusiastic as they were, while Rauffen would gleefully receive permission from the royal family as the highest authority in the knight course. At no point in this process did the will of the lower-ranking duchy come up.

Anastasius looked at Sylvester. “Aub Ehrenfest, is Rozemyne correct? Would such consultations really help the lower-ranking duchies?”

“They would. Even if the royal family *were* to ask for our opinion, the political influence of a top-ranking duchy might prevent us from voicing our true thoughts. We might end up having to accept the challenge either way. But an opportunity to speak with the royal family would make us feel protected—like our opinions are actually being considered.”

“Hm. Then I will consider it,” Anastasius replied with a nod. Hopefully this would reduce the number of people forced to play against their wishes. “Moving on, I am sorry about the Sovereign knights who interrupted your dinner game. They may have been trying to secure Rozemyne for the Zent, but they were not acting on any official orders. Hildebrand *did* mention wanting to save you from Dunkelfelger’s incessant proposals, and we believe the knights might have mistaken his musings for a royal decree, but that is no excuse; they acted of their own accord and even involved middle and lesser duchies, so they must be punished. Severely.” He sighed. “Still, I can’t fathom what drove them to act so suddenly.”

Apparently, the three main culprits were central figures in the

Sovereign Knight's Order. The king had trusted them more than any of the other knights, so news of their crimes had shocked him most of all.

I exchanged a look with Sylvester, realizing this was the perfect opportunity for us to broach a very important subject. "Prince Anastasius, do you know of a plant called trug?" I asked.

"Rozemyne!" Sylvester's eyes flitted between Sieglinde and Hannelore. "We can discuss that later."

I shook my head. "This is our only opportunity. As the Sovereign Knight's Order can no longer be trusted, who else can we turn to but Dunkelfelger in the event of another major, country-wide incident? Their obsession with ditter may be troublesome, but their strength is unmistakable, and they would allow no other duchy to surpass them."

Dunkelfelger had sprung into action during last year's attack, and they now knew how to further enhance their strength with blessings. Revealing our suspicions to them here was sure to work in our favor, especially when it was Sieglinde who would need to clean up after the men and prepare for the future, not the ditter-obsessed aub.

"Aub Ehrenfest can take over from here," I said. "I admit, I am still not very knowledgeable about trug." I wasn't sure how much we could reveal about our duchy's situation, so I made a reasonable excuse to leave the rest to Sylvester.

"I am unfamiliar with this 'trug.' Is it known in Dunkelfelger?" Anastasius asked.

Sieglinde shook her head. "At the very least, its existence is news to me. Can you tell us more about it, Aub Ehrenfest?"

Sylvester stopped clutching his stomach, now conscious that both Sieglinde and Anastasius were looking at him, and met their gaze with eyes full of resolve. "Trug is a very dangerous type of plant. Its leaves can be dried and burned, and the resulting smoke causes hallucinations, obscured memories, and feelings of intoxication. The only telltale sign that trug has been used is the sweet aroma it gives off when burned—and that is exactly what one of our apprentice knights noticed on the culprits when he approached you to say his farewells, Prince Anastasius. We have good reason to believe that a central figure in the Sovereignty is using the plant to their own ends."

Anastasius and Sieglinde both received this news with wide eyes.

"Aub Ehrenfest, we need an even more detailed explanation!" Anastasius demanded, but Sylvester slowly shook his head.

"We know very little about it ourselves. It was brought to our attention after it was used within Ehrenfest's borders, during a secret meeting of traitors connected to another duchy, and we witnessed its side effects after trying to read the memories of those we captured. The apprentice knight who detected the scent was initially called to this secret meeting alongside his parents, but he promptly left due to

being underage. His recollection of the fireplace being lit—a strange occurrence, as it was summer at the time—and the cloying smell in the air, coupled with the conflicted memories of the traitors, led a scholar to conclude that trug might have been used.”

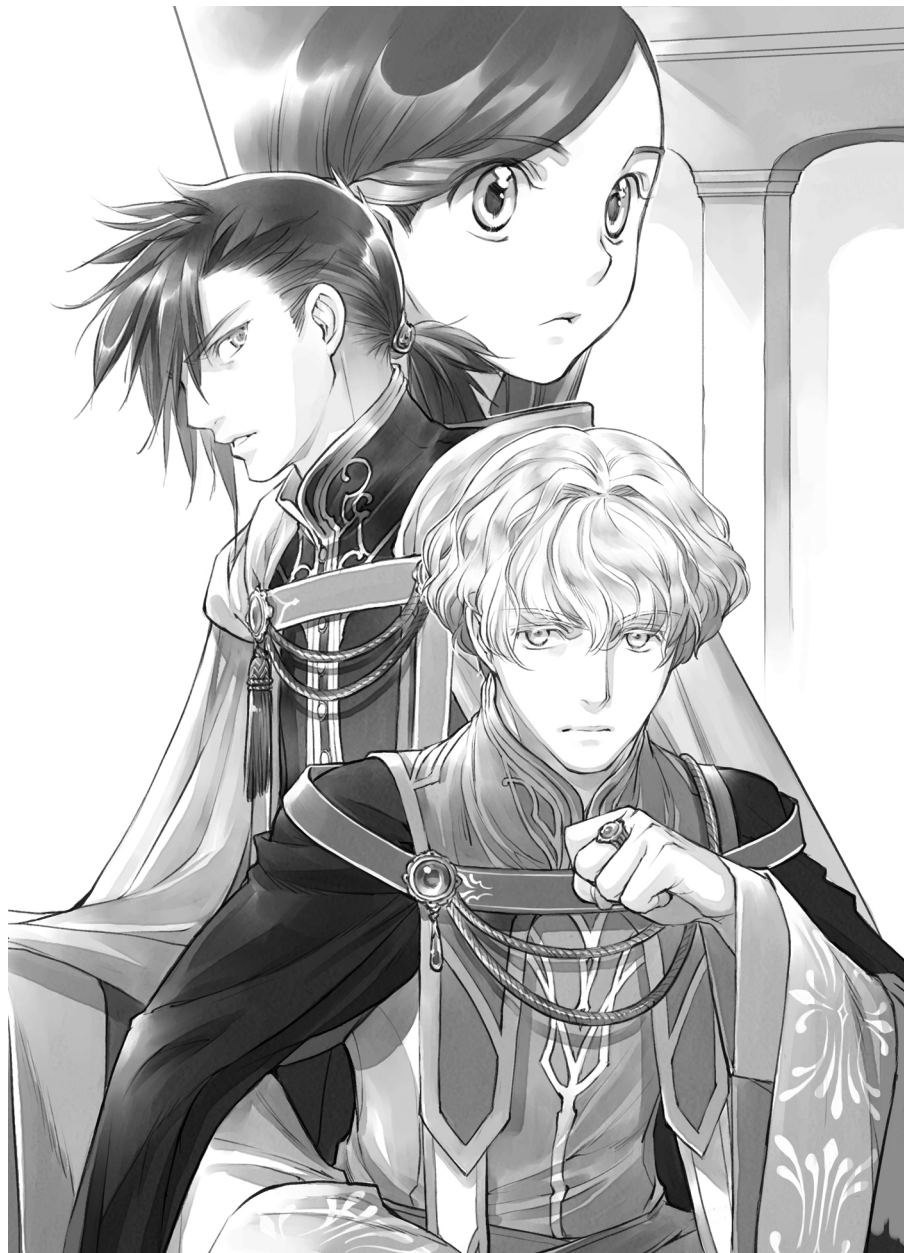
The scholar in question was over fifty. He had been taught about trug by his herbology professor, who then retired a short while after—before the scholar even graduated.

Sylvester continued, “The professor acknowledged that his students were unlikely to ever encounter the plant, but he still taught them about it as a precautionary measure. Our scholar does not know where it comes from, but he was told that it does not grow in Ehrenfest. That is the extent of our knowledge. If you wish to know more, then you will need to ask an older scholar who took more advanced herbology courses or search through the Sovereignty’s vast collection of documents.”

“I see...” Anastasius replied, then looked at Sylvester with firm eyes. “Aub Ehrenfest. You say these traitors were connected to another duchy. Tell me which one. At this juncture, it is crucial that we know.”

Tensions rose, and several uneasy seconds passed before Sylvester gave his answer.

“They were connected to my older sister Georgine, who exercises power as the first wife of Ahrensbach.”



A heavy silence weighed down on us all until Sylvester spoke again.

“Prince Anastasius, that is everything I can say.”

The prince sighed and said, “I appreciate your cooperation. At this point, Ehrenfest’s contributions are bordering on the innumerable.”

From there, he explained that several critically important magic tools were now operable again thanks to the mana obtained from the recent Dedication Ritual. The royal family had managed to replenish many locations, and over the past few days, the Zent had actually been able to rest for the first time in forever.

“Father is grateful that Ehrenfest cares so greatly about protecting its rituals and Rozemyne herself,” Anastasius noted. “If you so wish, your duchy will reach an even higher position in the duchy rankings next year. Tell me, Aub Ehrenfest... what are your thoughts on that?”

Anastasius’s gray eyes were narrowed in a strict, scrutinizing stare. He was clearly trying to determine whether Sylvester would respond in a manner befitting a proper archduke.

Sylvester returned the prince’s gaze, his dark-green eyes exuding resolve as he said, “I would ask that Ehrenfest move no higher than its current position. Just as Dunkelfelger and the royal family have pointed out before, Ehrenfest does not have enough nobles who can act as members of a top-ranking duchy. There would only be Ferdinand, who dealt with top-ranking duchies while maintaining his distance, as well as Rozemyne, whom he educated, and her retainers.”

An even higher position in the rankings would result in even more dealings with top-ranking duchies—but Ehrenfest was having too much trouble keeping its internal affairs in order to start dedicating manpower to diplomacy.

“Instead,” Sylvester continued, “I ask that you view Ehrenfest’s contributions thus far as making up for the fact we were unable to provide the Zent our aid during the civil war.”

“That... is not a bad suggestion. I will remember your words and pass them on to the Zent.”

And so, a deal was struck: we would forgo an even higher position in the rankings and, in return, Ehrenfest would start being treated equally to the duchies that had won the civil war.

“Now, on another note,” Anastasius said. “This is a request from the royal family as a whole: we wish for Hannelore and Rozemyne to visit the Royal Academy’s library every day throughout the Archduke Conference.” The royal family would need to go to the library themselves during that period, and they wanted our help as keyholders.

“I do not mind,” I replied, “but would it not be best to have

Sovereign archscholars take over as keyholders?”

“That was our original intention, but now that we see no reason to suspect either of you of planning a rebellion or other such malicious intentions, we have concluded that the duty is best left in your hands. You will not have any other responsibilities during the Archduke Conference, after all. So, will you accept our request?”

It was possible that members of the Sovereign Knight’s Order were being manipulated with trug—who was to say the same fate wouldn’t befall any scholars they entrusted the keys to? I confidently agreed to offer my assistance.

Hannelore thought for a moment before nodding as well. “There are rituals I wish to investigate further, and, while I do not share Lady Rozemyne’s familiarity with ancient languages, I will gladly do whatever I can to be of use to the royal family.”

Anastasius looked to our guardians next. Sylvester and Sieglinde expressed their agreement in turn.

“Prince Anastasius, I am going to be allowed *inside* the archive, correct?” I asked eagerly. Nothing was more important to me.

After a careful glance at Sylvester, the prince nodded and said, “Of course. During the Archduke Conference, I will not be the one having to separate you from your books; that burden will instead fall to your guardian.”

I took in a sharp breath. He was very clearly referring to the time I’d refused to leave the archive—and, as my retainers weren’t able to go inside, my antics had inconvenienced not just one but *two* princes.

Sylvester paled at Anastasius’s remark. “I am told that my foolish daughter troubled you and your elder brother with her book obsession,” he said to the prince. “I apologize profusely for her actions. We will take as much care as we can... but losing one of our Eternal Five, who support the supreme gods, has dealt Ehrenfest a devastating blow. We pray day and night for the wisdom to calm Ewigeliebe’s rampage following the loss of Geduldh.”

“Ah, I see,” Anastasius said, shooting me a bitter look. “It was Ferdinand who held the reins of this gremlin.”

Um, excuse me? What’s that supposed to mean?

I rested a hand on my cheek. Anastasius and Sylvester had reached some sort of understanding using euphemisms that had gone completely over my head.

“In any case,” Anastasius said, “I understand the situation you find yourselves in. Unfortunately, your only option is to struggle through it. The scholars I sent to Ahrensbach reported that your Geduldh has become quite a valuable asset there. Ahrensbach’s scholars are rejoicing that their duchy is finally on the verge of recovery. I would not want to remove Ferdinand now and risk Ahrensbach collapsing.”

Apparently, Yurgenschmidt's only open country gate was in Ahrensbach's ocean, and the absence of the Grutrissheit meant that the others had to remain shut. The one open gate couldn't be closed either, which meant that Ahrensbach was having to manage all international trade.

"Is there some kind of problem with the other country?" I asked.

There was a pause before Anastasius said, "We fear that a conflict may arise with Lanzenave." That reminded me—Ferdinand had mentioned in one of his letters that a princess of Adalgisa was coming. "Though that may not have much to do with any of you..."

He was right—it wouldn't have much to do with me or Ehrenfest. Ferdinand, however, was a seed of Adalgisa. He was also in Ahrensbach, which was responsible for the handover. And, as Ferdinand was important to us, we weren't *entirely* unrelated to the matter.

"I would disagree," I said. "Ferdinand is in Ahrensbach, so if something is going on, I must ask that you please tell us. I will save him, no matter what." But in response to my declaration, Anastasius and Sylvester shouted in perfect unison:

"Your getting involved would absolutely make things worse!"

Socializing with Other Duchies

“That is everything I wished to discuss,” Anastasius said, standing up. He instructed me to dispel Schutzaria’s shield, then moved outside the range of the sound-blocking magic tool and instructed his retainers to retrieve it.

Our own retainers mobilized at once. Ehrenfest’s attendants attempted to refresh the prince’s tea, but he refused and turned to Sylvester.

“This meeting has been more fruitful than I expected. You have my thanks. I must now return, but first... Aub Ehrenfest. According to the Sovereign temple, letting knights climb the shrine during a religious ceremony is an unthinkable act of blasphemy. They asked that you have blue priests and shrine maidens do the accompanying instead. This should not be a problem for Ehrenfest, where even archduke candidates wear blue robes.”

In other words, we could bring whomever we wanted as long as they were wearing blue robes. Anastasius was subtly telling us to have our adult guard knights don the clothes of blue priests and shrine maidens so they could accompany us.

I’m pretty sure my guard knights would be willing to do that.

I climbed down from my chair and finally dispelled Schutzaria’s shield. Anastasius confirmed that his retainers had retrieved the magic tool, then finished saying his farewells and departed with a flourish of his cape.

“We must be taking our leave as well,” Sieglinde said. “We have taken advantage of your hospitality for long enough.”

The throng of blue-capes soon disappeared, only to be replaced by a group of Klassenberg red-capes.

“Aub Ehrenfest, do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Aub Klassenberg.”

Sylvester and Aub Klassenberg exchanged the usual pleasantries, then I performed the customary first-time greeting.

“I am Rozemyne. Aub Klassenberg, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”

“You may... I should note, while you were speaking with Dunkelfelger and Prince Anastasius, I was observing—with great interest, might I add—the joint research that Ehrenfest has done this

year. I am amazed that one duchy could have a hand in such a diverse range of projects.”

Tea and sweets were prepared for the aub while he went on to describe the reports he had received from the apprentice scholars involved in our research.

“They all said they had experienced a true ritual for the very first time—that their prayers became one, their mana was drawn out, and from it was born a radiant beam of divine light. The very sight moved them to the core, apparently. The participants also seemed more appreciative of the archducal families supplying their duchies’ foundations and the royal family supporting Yurgenschmidt.”

Clarissa had said something similar when reporting on Dunkelfelger’s reactions, but she was always so prone to exaggeration that I’d only taken her half seriously.

I really was oblivious. It didn’t help that our own archscholars looked more exhausted than interested at the time.

Perhaps their apparent lack of wonderment was because they had already heard about Wilfried and Charlotte circling the provinces for Spring Prayer and the Dedication Ritual. Or maybe it was because they’d already seen me give blessings while playing the harspiel, struggling with the blessing leak during the dedication whirl, rejuvenating the gathering spot, and carrying out the ditte ritual... Most of our archscholars who had participated said only that the experience had made them more sympathetic to my previous “incidents.”

I’m probably to blame for Ehrenfest’s students being so accustomed to blessings in such a weird way...

“Will the ritual also be performed next year?” Aub Klassenberg asked. “There are many knights and attendants who have come forward saying that they wish to experience it as well.”

I shook my head. “This year’s ritual was performed as part of our joint research with Dunkelfelger. Few duchies could afford to offer up so much precious mana annually.”

“I am told the participants received particularly effective rejuvenation potions. If some were provided again, an arrangement could surely be made—especially considering how much it helps the royal family.”

We had prepared rejuvenation potions because so many of our participants had needed to play ditte and because their efforts had greatly benefited our research, but I wasn’t going to make that a yearly occurrence either. Just how much reading time had preparing for the ritual cost me? And why would I sacrifice even more when we had nothing to gain? I already had my guardians *and* the royal family telling me not to do anything unnecessary.

“I imagine the royal family would be overjoyed to have a duchy offer them mana from their own temple. Encouraging everyone to reevaluate their opinion of the temple was one of my main goals, you know. I would appreciate your understanding in this matter, Aub Klassenberg.”

In other words: “If you want to do the ritual, do it in your own duchy’s temple or something.” Aub Klassenberg must have understood my message loud and clear because he raised an eyebrow and shot Sylvester a look, likely trying to get him to talk some sense into his daughter.

Sylvester cleared his throat and adopted what was ultimately quite a twitchy smile. “The ritual in question was joint research—that is, a student activity—so I am in no position to interfere. Furthermore, the Farthest Hall is under the management of the Sovereign temple. Performing the ritual once for research is reasonable enough, but performing it annually in the Royal Academy may deepen the schism that exists between the royal family and the Sovereign temple. Is that not something Klassenberg would wish to avoid, especially now that Lady Eglantine has been married into the royal family?”

He was taking advantage of the fact that parents generally weren’t allowed to speak on Royal Academy business, and the relationship between the Sovereign temple and the royal family to dodge the request.

Sensing that we weren’t going to budge on the issue, Aub Klassenberg decided to move on—albeit with a rather disappointed expression. “According to the merchants we sent on business this year, Ehrenfest has many rare products indeed. The new books popular in the Royal Academy are being made in the distant lands of giebes, but the city still offers much in the way of novel inventions.”

He was referring specifically to our water pumps and comfortable carriages, which the merchants had apparently come across. They hadn’t spread very far during their first year, so they might have been easy to miss, but they had gotten quite popular during their second. The merchants had been amazed by how much things could change in a single year.

“In particular, the pumps that draw water from wells seem revolutionary,” the aub continued. “Many requests were made for us to bring them to Klassenberg.”

Sylvester turned to a scholar behind him, at which point Hartmut took a step forward. He had started attending every single one of my meetings with the lower-city merchants, so he was especially well equipped to advise on the subject.

“Unfortunately, we are not yet in a position to mass-produce the pumps,” Hartmut informed Sylvester. “They require exceptionally

precise parts that few smiths are capable of making. My sincerest apologies, but it may be some time before we are prepared to sell them.”

Mass-producing our water pumps wasn’t an option when Johann was the only smith who could make the required parts. Plus, above all else, we cared more about spreading them through Ehrenfest’s lower city than spreading them to other duchies. If we wanted them in the south of the city, then we couldn’t start selling them yet.

Sylvester nodded and then repeated the answer to Aub Klassenberg.

“Hm...” Aub Klassenberg murmured. “This precision part of which you speak may be too complex a task for Ehrenfest’s craftspeople, but perhaps ours will stand a better chance.”

A scholar behind the aub then added, “Could you perhaps sell us the schematics for the pump as you sold the recipe for your pound cake?”

Sylvester crossed his arms in thought.

Hartmut looked at me and said, “That might be difficult. The schematics are overseen by the Smithing Guild to ensure that Lady Rozemyne’s personal smith receives a royalty payment each time they are used. We *could* sell them to Klassenberg’s Smithing Guild, but only if they are willing to operate in the same way.” He smiled at Aub Klassenberg and the scholars accompanying him. “And who can say whether a greater duchy would be willing to keep an eye on its commoners?”

Hartmut! You sound just like the merchants who say they can’t trust Klassenberg because they always act selfishly! Though, uh... you’re not wrong.

“In any case, we will need to discuss whether the arrangements can be made,” Sylvester said. “Let us discuss the details during the Archduke Conference.”

Thus ended our conversation with Klassenberg. Next came Drewanchel, then Hauchletzte, then Gilessenmeyer. The aubs approached us one after another and requested that we have more slots available for business. In response, we methodically repeated the same answer: it would be too much of a struggle for Ehrenfest this year.

After what felt like an eternity, fourth bell rang. It was lunchtime. We were going to make our way back to the dormitory, but I was so exhausted that I asked Sylvester whether I could travel the short distance in my Pandabus.

“So tired...” I groaned upon our arrival.

“Sure was rough speaking with one top-ranking duchy after another,” Sylvester said in agreement. “Still, I’m glad you and

Hartmut were there.”

Sylvester and his scholars knew plenty about the printing industry and the books being sold, but they didn’t know too much about the water pumps, carriages, and so on, which they had only glimpsed in the lower city. I thanked Hartmut for having offered us his expertise.

“I am glad to have been useful to you, Lady Rozemyne. But should the aub’s scholars not have been able to provide such information? It has been over a year since you gifted those inventions to the aub, so why do they know so little about them?”

“Because I recently distanced my scholar who was entrusted with that role,” Sylvester replied curtly, telling us that the scholar in question had gotten wrapped up in the purge. “Right... I can’t always rely on you, which means I’ll need to go back to the lower city to check out these inventions for myself, huh? There’s no other way for me to learn about them now that Ferdinand is gone.”

Ferdinand had often sent Sylvester whatever intelligence he gathered from me or Justus. Now that he was gone, however, Sylvester would need to set up some other means to learn about the lower city.

“Rather than going all the way to the lower city, why not send some scholars in your place?” I asked. “We could even have one of my retainers supervise them. That would ensure they do not act unjustly. Besides, should preparing Groschel to house our next batch of visiting merchants not come first?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem as long as we have your mana. Guess that means we can get more merchants slots—”

“I’m afraid not. First of all, we will need to wait a year to see whether Groschel’s lower city can maintain its cleanliness. Inns also need to be established and their staff trained as capable hosts. There absolutely needs to be a preparation period.”

I could rely on the soldiers and Gutenbergs to keep Ehrenfest’s lower city clean, but I didn’t have any connections like that in Groschel. We would need to entrust everything to the giebe, but as I recalled, he was the kind of person who would order around commoners while paying no mind to their thoughts and feelings. I wanted to believe that he had improved since then, but we still needed to be careful; if the aub started being too hasty with his demands, it would be the commoners who suffered.

“We will rely on Groschel’s scholars as we relied on the Merchant’s Guild and the Plantin Company,” Sylvester said.

“Your demand that Groschel prepare to host merchants from other duchies at once would be no different from the king demanding that you get Ehrenfest’s castle ready to host every other aub at a moment’s notice,” I said. “Wouldn’t you call that unreasonable and ask for more

time to prepare?"

Sylvester fell silent along with his retainers. "It remains true that Ehrenfest needs to change as soon as it can. Let us give Groschel enough time that these changes can be adequately made."

Thus, it was decided that we would speak with Giebe Groschel about preparing his lower city to welcome merchants at the next feasible opportunity.

From there, Sylvester began lecturing Wilfried about contracts. He stressed that Wilfried should *always* have his scholars check whatever forms he intended to sign so that he wouldn't fall victim to such trickery again.

"Lord Lestilaut swore to the gods that he would give up on Rozemyne if we won at bride-taking ditler, so I thought he would give up on canceling the engagement unconditionally..." Wilfried said.

"I did as well," I added, but a verbal agreement between children in the Royal Academy obviously wouldn't carry as much weight as a signed contract. Caution was essential.

"I'll make sure to double-check the conditions before signing any contracts in the future," Wilfried said. "But why are we discussing this now? The thing I signed wasn't a contract."

"I didn't think so either, but apparently it was an essential contract for playing bride-taking ditler."

Although it had *appeared* to be a normal report listing the conditions and participants of our match, the inclusion of signatures had turned it into an official contract. In other words, Lestilaut had duped him. But no matter how clearly Sylvester and I tried to explain that fact, Wilfried merely exchanged looks with his retainers, then shook his head.

"That can't be right. The document was just some budgetary formality for the Dunkelfelger Dormitory. It only carries weight within their duchy."

"But as soon as you signed that paper, it became a contract," Sylvester said.

"That can't be true. No way could that paper function as an interduchy contract. It wasn't official. Aren't you the one who taught me that, Rozemyne?" He glared at me, blatantly frustrated, as if trying to ask, "Did you teach me a lie?"

"I taught you that?" I replied, unsure what he was referring to.

"Yeah. You said parchment from the Parchment Guild absolutely has to be used for proper contracts—that cheap Ehrenfest paper is only used for notes and reports. You told me to be careful, since any agreements not written on parchment wouldn't be officially recognized."

"Ah!" Sylvester and I exclaimed in unison.

That's why neither of us recognized it as a contract during the tournament, even with the signatures.

At a glance, the sheet had appeared to be a report—but that was because it had been written on Ehrenfest paper instead of parchment.

“Lord Lestilaut said it was just a financial document, and we checked that for ourselves. Right, Ignaz?”

“Yes, my lord. We confirmed that the document was in regard to budgetary matters.”

Lestilaut had wanted to form a contract that would give him an advantage over Ehrenfest, which was why he had intentionally misled us. Wilfried, upon seeing that the apparent budgetary document was written on plant paper, had mainly been concerned about whether others would consider it valid.

Ignaz explained, “During our first year, only students from Ehrenfest worked with that kind of paper, and we received strange looks while using it in the library. During our meeting with Lord Lestilaut, we were simply overjoyed to see that now even Dunkelfelger was using it for important documents...” He slumped over, looking ashamed of his own carelessness.

Meanwhile, Wilfried was looking worried. “Dunkelfelger’s apprentice scholars appeared to have only Ehrenfest paper on them, so maybe they didn’t know it can’t be used for official contracts.”

In contrast, our scholars always carried *both* kinds of paper, since we never knew when parchment might be needed.

“Um...” I turned to Sylvester. “You made it clear when signing those sales deals at the Archduke Conference that cheap Ehrenfest paper can’t be used for contracts, right?”

“Of course. It was an important condition for their Parchment Guilds too. But for Dunkelfelger to have brought some out as a contract... They must not understand.”

We would need to remind any duchies we did future business with as well.

I nodded and said, “In that case, let’s send an ordonnanz to Dunkelfelger. Before lunchtime ends, of course.” Directly informing them of their mistake during the Interduchy Tournament might have been too rude.

“I signed the document, so I’ll send the ordonnanz,” Wilfried said. He got Ignaz to assist him, then glanced back at me and added, “I’m not that incompetent. Have a little more faith in me, Rozemyne.”

“My apologies, dear brother.”

An ordonnanz returned not long after.

“We thank you ever so much for informing us, Lord Wilfried,” came Hannelore’s voice. “We will take care in the future.” In the background, we could just barely hear Sieglinde say, “What do you

mean you used it all for your art?"

After clearing up those misunderstandings, our conversation settled down and turned to Ehrenfest's joint research projects. My first question was how the demonstrations had been received; we of the archducal family had been too busy hosting visitors to check for ourselves.

Marianne leapt at the chance to speak, her eyes positively sparkling. She explained that Gundolf had stopped by to see how Ehrenfest was presenting its work with Drewanchel and had been very taken aback when he saw magic tools that hadn't previously been a part of their research.

"He was very surprised when we explained that we made the new exhibits based on your ideas, Lady Rozemyne. He said that he never expected us to take the same idea and use it to create competent magic tools that demand so little mana."

Both of our duchies had created the same kind of product—portable music players that relied on the unique properties of effon paper—but we had taken that idea in completely opposite directions.

"Furthermore," Marianne continued, "he commended us for having kept such impressive inventions hidden from him and praised us for our growth."

Specifically, he had said that it was common practice for researchers to keep the important details of their research secret and that, by doing this and taking him by surprise, Ehrenfest had managed to prove itself. He had also said that he absolutely wanted one of the magic tools that made books return to their rightful place for his laboratory.

Ignaz and the others reported the other reactions we had received.

"Professor Gundolf asked us many questions about our graphs," Philine said with a strained smile as she thought back to their conversation.

The graphs we had used weren't anything too complex—they were probably no more complicated than what was covered in grade school—so I'd assumed that anyone who saw them would immediately understand. But as it turned out, nobody had visualized numbers like that before. Gundolf's first reaction had been to disregard the research itself and focus entirely on how we were presenting it.

"Philine ended up explaining the joint research while I explained the graphs," Roderick said. He had initially been speaking with Gundolf and Gundolf alone, but more and more professors and scholars had tagged along until it was like Roderick was teaching his very own class. It had been a very uncomfortable experience, in his words.

"Those from Drewanchel intend to use graphs for their research

next year,” Roderick concluded. “They also expressed a very strong desire to do research with you personally, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I am glad you did such a good job explaining everything to them, Roderick,” I said. There were still many other kinds of graphs that we would slowly introduce over time.

While Philine and Roderick were giving their presentations, Muriella had been circling around the arena and viewing the other duchies’ research. “Dunkelfelger’s presentation will end with a live demonstration of the ritual at the end of dinner,” she noted. “Most adults don’t know anything about such matters, so Lady Clarissa said they decided to just *show* everyone the dance.”

Once the students were done playing dinner, Dunkelfelger’s adult knights would perform the ritual, play dinner, and then show everything up to the returning mana part of the ritual. Aub Dunkelfelger was really getting into it.

“That sounds a lot like a performance,” I said. Even the Dunkelfelger students were good dancers, so the adults must have been amazing.

“Oh, that reminds me—I spoke briefly with Lady Lueuradi of Jossbrenner. She wished to thank you for her divine protection, Lady Rozemyne, so she deemed it unfortunate that you were busy socializing.”

Jossbrenner the Tenth was definitely at the bottom of the duchies high enough in rank to move around socializing in the first half of the Interduchy Tournament, if one considered the duchies around it. Lueuradi definitely wouldn’t have been able to intrude upon conversations involving royals and top-ranking duchies.

“This is partially my fault for telling her, but... she listened to every single message recorded on our shumil and was enraptured by its words of love. By the time she reached the advertisement at the end, she was yearning to read the new book.”

It might have been entirely thanks to Lueuradi that Ahrensbach had ended up advertising our book. I remembered the Ferdinand stamp of complete approval and muttered, “Very good, Lady Lueuradi.”

“However, we are not doing business with Jossbrenner, so Lady Lueuradi could not buy the book,” Muriella continued. “She was so despondent that I suggested she write her own stories. Perhaps this will result in more books being brought into the world.”

Lueuradi had absolutely loved the idea.

I smiled and said, “Well done, Muriella.”

Getting more people to start writing stories was very important. Lueuradi was an apprentice archscholar, so perhaps she would end up following in Elvira’s footsteps.

As I finished my lunch, I couldn't help but feel that I was witnessing the birth of a new author.

Socializing with Frenbeltaag

“Lady Rozemyne, might we ask for another blessing this year?” Leonore asked, stepping forward as representative of the apprentice knights playing ditler this afternoon. “There is a chance that Professor Fraularm will obstruct us again this year.”

At once, I recalled our previous struggle against the hundertteilung. The apprentice knights all looked uneasy, but I shook my head at them and said, “You came in sixth during training even without my blessings, no? You have the strength to succeed, and depending on me will only stifle your growth.”

In other words, I had no intention of blessing them again.

“Understood,” Leonore replied, backing down at once. She had asked only to be sure, but Cornelius lacked that context.

“Why aren’t you blessing them this year?” he asked, blinking at me. “Dunkelfelger will be using their blessings, so should we not use ours? Your decision here will have a significant impact on how we perform.”

“We do not want Ehrenfest to rely on me forever. Those from Dunkelfelger have learned to obtain blessings themselves by cooperating with one another.”

Not to mention, we’ve agreed to keep Ehrenfest from rising any further up the duchy rankings, so...

I chose to keep that to myself, though. It was something we had discussed in private within Anastasius’s sound-blocking field, and the news probably would have impacted everyone’s morale.

“Dunkelfelger’s adults are going to perform a demonstration of the ritual after the last ditler game, are they not? Every duchy will be able to learn from their example then. They will need to cooperate to earn their own blessings, so I must ask that Ehrenfest strive toward the same; otherwise, our apprentice knights will end up being the only ones who do not obtain divine protections despite this being our research to begin with.”

The king had promised that those who wished to repeat the ritual for obtaining divine protections could do so after the graduation ceremony, and we could do the ritual again once we returned to Ehrenfest. However, those retakes would be meaningless if the knights didn’t pray enough and offer up a lot of mana.

“The amount of mana offered is the key to success,” I said. “Learn

to obtain blessings on your own.”

“Understood!” the apprentice knights declared in unison.

Seeing that, Angelica muttered, “Lady Rozemyne, will I also become stronger by doing this ritual...?” The idea of everyone becoming more capable by learning to obtain their own blessings had evidently caught her interest.

“Obtaining blessings will make you stronger for that particular moment,” I explained. “Dunkelfelger’s ritual grants blessings from multiple gods at once, so it is especially potent. And on top of that, if you perform it sincerely on a regular basis, it will become easier for you to obtain divine protections. You will still need to memorize the names of the gods, though, Angelica.”

“Memorize...” Angelica really must have hated the studying she did in the temple because her expression turned pensive. “Can Stenluka do it for me?” she sighed, stroking the feystone at her hip. As always, Stenluka’s sheath only looked big enough for a dagger; few who saw it would expect him to be a longsword.

“If you obtain many divine protections, then you will be able to use your mana more efficiently, and Stenluka will grow more,” I said. “As you are a manablade user, this opportunity could grant you more strength than it would most others, but, well...”

“What?! It makes me use less mana?!” Angelica asked, looking at me like nobody had ever told her that before. Apparently, even while redoing her studies, it had never occurred to her that memorizing the names of the gods was to her own benefit.

“Damuel explained this to you before, Angelica!” Cornelius exclaimed.

“Mm, perhaps... Either way, I will start taking my efforts to memorize the names of the gods seriously.”

“I’m glad to see you’re finally motivated,” I said.

“If you had found this drive a bit earlier, Damuel wouldn’t have suffered even half as much...” Cornelius added, clearly sympathizing with his fellow retainer. Trying to teach Angelica when she wasn’t interested was said to be torturous.

It was soon time for the Interduchy Tournament to recommence, so we made our way back to the arena. En route, Cornelius continued to tell me how much Damuel was struggling—now with Hartmut chiming in as well.

During the morning section of the tournament, the top-ranking duchies would mobilize to greet duchies they were on good terms with or wished to grow closer to. Ehrenfest hadn’t mobilized at all in that time, and if we wasted the afternoon as well, we wouldn’t be able to visit anyone.

“Should we not start greeting others?” I asked Sylvester, looking

around at the duchies preparing for afternoon mobilization.

He glared at me. "You think we should go around greeting others at the same time as the bottom-ranking duchies? Even when we've been told to start acting like a top-ranking duchy? Do you expect us to go back to the top-ranking duchies we've already spoken to and reopen business discussions?"

I frantically shook my head; the last thing I wanted to do was reignite those business discussions. My intention had only been to peek at the other duchies' research and see what their socializing was like.

"Take a break and watch some ditter," he said. "Now that you've met the king, you can't skip out on the awards ceremony."

"But the bottom-ranking duchies are going to be greeting us, right? Will I even have time to rest?" A repeat of this morning would hardly be revitalizing.

"Based on last year, I'd like to think you'll at least have *some*, but it depends how much of an impact your joint research had."

"Ngh..."

We were only crediting the participants as helpers, but I was told our research had broken new ground in both its scale and the fact that it had afforded people the chance to have their name listed next to royalty. It had been very impactful as a result. Duchies that had needed to send apprentice scholars instead of archduke candidates were even acting like the scholars had received an otherwise unattainable honor.

"We also need to consider that the duchies knocked away by Schutzaria's shield probably hate and resent you," Sylvester continued, his voice quieter than before. "Naturally, I don't expect anything to happen here, especially with all the guards around, but... you never know." He looked around at the nearby Sovereign guards. Anyone who caused a fuss when the Knight's Order was already so on edge about an attack would surely face a much harsher punishment than Immerdink had last year.

The Sovereign Knight's Order really is tense. Even the king himself will view them as incompetent if the Interduchy Tournament is interrupted two years in a row.

"Ditter shall now recommence!" Rauffen announced. "This second half will be a tad more elaborate than the first. Everyone, please enjoy!"

In short, the professors were going to be using more niche enemies for this round, having been inspired by Ehrenfest's battle against the hunderteilung last year. They believed it was also important to know how to deal with rare feybeasts upon encountering them.

“This will put Ehrenfest at a significant advantage,” I said. “Last year’s hundertteilung spurred everyone to study hard in case Professor Fraularm attempted another trick.”

“But perhaps the other duchies prepared as well, fearing the same fate,” Cornelius said.

I paused for a moment to consider his words. It was possible that Dunkelfelger had made such preparations, but to my knowledge, they had focused entirely on increasing the efficiency of their pillar-forming ritual.

“Ahrensbach!” came a call. They would be playing the first game of the second half, and Hirschur was in charge of summoning their feybeast. I was very curious to see what she would produce.

“May I go watch?” I asked Sylvester.

He paused for a beat and then said, “Sure. I’ll call you back if we get any important visitors, so go spectate with your apprentice guard knights.”

As instructed, I went with my retainers to the audience stands. Just like last year, Rihyarda prepared something for me to stand on—and the moment I climbed up onto it, I realized that my line of sight was higher than before.

Aah! I’m growing!

I watched the grounds below, still smug that I could see more than last year. The light-violet-capes were all standing in position while Hirschur produced her schtappe and channeled mana into a magic circle. The circle flashed, and atop it appeared a massive talfrosch.

“A talfrosch?!” I exclaimed.

“You recognize it, Lady Rozemyne?” Angelica asked.

“Erm, well...” I gave a vague nod; they were the frogs I had encountered when collecting ingredients for my jureve. I couldn’t give any details, since that hunt had been a secret, but I remembered our battle well. They even split apart when attacked. Goose bumps rose all over my skin as I remembered the tiny, warty frogs raining down on us, and how I had almost been swallowed alongside Brigitte.

“They have similar attributes to the hundertteilung from last year,” I explained.

It was clear that Ahrensbach’s apprentice knights were unsure what to do with this new foe. To make matters worse for them, this was speed ditte; their floundering was costing them precious time.

The knights eventually decided on a preliminary attack, but it didn’t appear to do much damage. Weaker blows were just reflected back at them.

“Let’s do it!”

“Right!”

They must have sensed that their efforts were going nowhere

because two apprentice knights started directing mana into their swords, which began glowing all sorts of colors. They were going to strike the talfrosch with a massive attack.

Everyone else readied their shields as the two apprentice knights swung their swords, unleashing attacks of all the hues of the rainbow. Two beams of mana swirled and twisted toward the talfrosch, then erupted in an ear-splitting explosion that caused a shockwave.

“We did it!”

“Not yet! The circle’s still glowing!”

The magic circle would fade when all of the feybeasts were dead, but it was still shining. One knight honed his senses, conscious that the battle wasn’t over yet, only for a deluge of tiny talfroschs to rain down all over the arena.

“G-Gah!”

“Get all of them! Don’t leave a single one!”

The apprentice knights began flying all over the place, killing as many of the tiny talfroschs as they could. Their targets being small made them easy to defeat, but it also made them hard to find, especially when they were spread over such a wide area.

“This is the same situation that Ehrenfest was in last year,” I mused. “Professor Hirschur’s revenge, perhaps?”

“This is still a much easier battle,” Leonore said. “Hundertteilungs must be reduced to their smallest size before they can be defeated, and they re-fuse with ease, but these are not concerns when fighting talfroschs.”

Judithe nodded. “If she was trying to get revenge, she should have given them a hundertteilung too. That thing was a real pain.”

“But hundertteilungs are native to Ahrensbach,” Matthias added. “We can conclude that she chose a feybeast that shares its attributes but is still unfamiliar to the students.”

Everyone was satisfied with that explanation, and we all returned to watching the match. From the look of things, it would still be some time before they eliminated all of the frogs.

“Lady Rozemyne,” came Lieseleta’s voice; she had just come over. “The aub is calling for you. Frenbelta’s archducal couple have arrived. Please return to the socializing spot.”

As I went to inform my guard knights, I noticed that Hartmut was no longer with us. Even as I looked around, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh?” I said. “I don’t see Hartmut.”

“He went to greet Clarissa’s parents,” Lieseleta explained. Evidently, he had gone to see Dunkelfelger while I was watching the ditter match.

“Do you think he’ll be able to convince them safely?”

“There is no need to worry. Prince Anastasius and the first wife of Dunkelfelger have forbidden them from playing ditter, and their discussion will primarily focus on what to do if Clarissa forces her way into Ehrenfest alone.” Hartmut had to be ready in case the engagement was canceled and Clarissa went rogue, so there was a lot to be discussed, including how to contact her parents, how to return her, and what arrangements to make if a visit to Ehrenfest proved necessary.

Lieseleta continued, “Her parents have been at a loss ever since deducing that Clarissa’s main interest is you and not her relationship.”

Upon arriving back at our table, we found Sylvester sitting with Frenbeltag’s archducal couple. “Rozemyne,” he said, “these are Aub Frenbeltag and my elder sister Constanze.”

So this is Lady Constanze, huh?

She was Sylvester’s second-eldest sister and one of the rare few individuals whose personality I already knew even though this was our first encounter. After all, in *Royal Academy Love Stories*, she had played a major role in mediating her brother’s romance. Her facial features reminded me more of Sylvester than Detlinde or Georgine—she was even giving me the same intrigued look that Sylvester had given me when we first met. They weren’t completely alike, though; Constanze might have resembled the previous aub, but she had blonde hair and blue eyes.

Beside her was Aub Frenbeltag, who looked so much like Charlotte that one might have assumed he was her father. He had a kind expression on his face, from what I could see.

I knelt in front of our two guests and performed first greetings.

“I am Rozemyne. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”

“You may.”

Once I was done and seated, Aub Frenbeltag looked at me with a gentle smile. “We always come here during the Interduchy Tournament, but this is our first time speaking with you.”

“Rudiger is sad that you two so rarely get to meet,” Constanze added, likewise smiling. “There is much about the temple and religious ceremonies that he wishes to discuss.”

My impression of Rudiger was reasonably positive; he had called for me to be allowed to attend the tea party for cousins, plus he had apparently gone to the temple and helped improve his duchy’s harvest. Had I not returned to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual, I surely would have spoken with him more than Detlinde during our tea party.

“I cannot see Lady Florencia here. Is she not feeling well?”

Constanze asked in a hushed voice, paying close attention to her surroundings. Florencia was Aub Frenbeltag's younger sister, so not seeing her here was a natural cause for concern.

"This is not something I can make public yet, but... it might be important for you to know. In truth, she has started to show signs of pregnancy, so we are being more careful with her health. We are keeping an eye on her for now and plan for her to participate tomorrow if she feels well enough, but..."

"WHAT?!" I exclaimed, my eyes wide. That revelation had come out of nowhere!

Sylvester glared at me and said to keep quiet. Nobles generally kept their children a secret until they were baptized, and on the rare occasions when they *did* tell someone sooner, it surely wasn't during the Interduchy Tournament. I was glad to have a new little brother or sister on the horizon, but I couldn't celebrate here. Instead, I settled for wiggling in my seat, my hand clapped over my mouth to keep all the things I wanted to say from spilling out.

A new little brother or sister! Now I've really gotta make more black-and-white picture books for babies! I've gotta!

But while I was starting to get baby fever, Constanze looked at Sylvester in exasperation. "A pregnancy now, of all times...? Do you truly intend to take no other wives? I acknowledge your dedication to loving only Lady Florencia, but you are both too old and your duchy is too highly ranked for you to continue this little fantasy. How long will it be until you grow up?" She had suddenly become the embodiment of an elder sister chastising her little brother.

"It wasn't intentional," Sylvester responded with a sulky pout. "It just happened. I expect this is Liebeskhilfe's divine protection, bestowed upon me so that I don't need to take a second wife."

"You always cling to the most convenient interpretation..." Constanze sighed, resting a hand on her forehead.

Aub Frenbeltag gave a wry smile. "I, for one, am relieved that you still care so deeply for Florencia, even with your duchy's new rank." His little sister's position was precarious enough already, so he had feared that her treatment would worsen or that there would be drama with a second or third wife as Ehrenfest pulled further ahead of Frenbeltag in the duchy rankings.

"I heard that Lord Rudiger is participating in Frenbeltag's religious ceremonies," I said, "but how exactly is your duchy faring?" Frenbeltag had decided not to play ditler against Dunkelfelger, so none of their students had participated in the Dedication Ritual. I wanted to know how they were doing since, unlike other duchies, they had participated in rituals on their own.

"Our harvest improved considerably after Rudiger started

performing the temple's ceremonies, so we have since been having other archduke candidates and their retainers accompany him, while the giebess actively fill the chalices to enrich their land as much as possible. And thanks to your joint research with Dunkelfelger, we will likely be able to perform the rituals more efficiently."

"That's wonderful to hear," I said. "But did you not face a lot of resistance when you proposed that archduke candidates start entering the temple and participating in rituals? Our Dedication Ritual here in the Royal Academy taught me that the temple is looked down upon all over the country."

"It was disfavored in Frenbelta as well," Constanze said with a smile. "However, our situation was dire enough that we were willing to try anything to improve things. *Anything*."

Aub Frenbelta smiled as well. "Constanze was the first to accept Rudiger's suggestion. Those with Ehrenfest blood make the most surprising decisions at times, such as assigning one of their archduke candidates to be the High Bishop or having their own children perform temple ceremonies. And with your trend of doing one new thing after another, Lady Rozemyne, I must conclude that you are the quintessential Ehrenfest archduke candidate."

He went on to explain that Frenbelta's temple was being reformed so that nobles could enter and everyone would find themselves more at ease there.

"Distaste for the temple has certainly gone down since the royal family performed that religious ceremony," Constanze said. "We believe this might be a good opportunity to teach the nobles of duchies that lost the civil war to participate in their Spring Prayers and Harvest Festivals." Frenbelta's previous attempts to convince them had proven unsuccessful, but the newfound interest in religious ceremonies would surely make them more willing to listen.

"Perhaps next year," she continued, "Ehrenfest could do research with Frenbelta. Our duchies could examine changes in a duchy's crop yield after sending its archduke candidates around its Central District and having them participate in Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. Our own harvest has increased two years in a row, so I am convinced that our findings would be worth spreading far and wide. What do you think, Sylvester?"

"Research is done by the students, Sister," Sylvester replied with a half-smile.

"What do *you* think, Lady Rozemyne?" she asked me, her blue eyes brimming with anticipation.

Frenbelta and Ehrenfest were the only duchies that had witnessed the effects of one's archduke candidates touring their Central District. I didn't mind the thought of our duchies collaborating

—if we provided evidence that this technique resulted in a greater harvest, then we could motivate more duchies to reform their temples—but I wanted to dedicate my time to researching new magic tools for my library.

“This was my only uninterrupted year in the Royal Academy,” I said. “Thus, it would be better to have Wilfried or Charlotte lead the research instead. I will provide what assistance I can from the side.”

“In that case, we must speak with Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte at once. Do excuse us, Lady Rozemyne.”

And so, Frenbeldag’s archducal couple went to Wilfried and Charlotte’s table. I watched them go, then whispered to Sylvester, “Lord Rudiger has been frequenting the temple for some time, but as soon as the royal family changed public perception of religious ceremonies, they chose to propose this research that only they can do... Frenbeldag may have dropped in the rankings, but it sure is a former top-ranking duchy.”

“Aub Frenbeldag has always been a smart one,” he muttered in response. “Once their harvest is more stable and their population recovers, they’ll climb back up in no time. We’ll need to bring our nobles up to speed so we don’t lose our own position in the process.”

Ditter and Dunkelfelger's Demonstration

"Aub Ehrenfest," the apprentice knights said, "we are up next!"

It was almost time for Ehrenfest to play ditter, so Sylvester and I got up from our table and went to the audience stands. Knights wearing Gilessenmeyer's dark-brown capes were flying around, still partway through their match. I wondered what feybeast they were fighting—then I saw five yellow, spiky balls bounce around the arena.

"The heck are those?" Sylvester asked, glaring down at the arena.

"Taunadels..." I replied. "Those cursed things."

They were fey creatures—well, feyfish—that reminded me a lot of a puffer fish or a sea urchin with a tail. I still clung to that bitter memory of not being able to eat any during the fish dissection due to their meat being full of poison.

"Isn't this an easy win?" Sylvester asked. "They don't seem very dangerous, especially in such a big arena."

"Not at all," I replied. "They shoot their long, thin, poisonous spines in all directions, so they're very dangerous if you don't know the right countermeasures."

The apprentice knights watching the match all nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

"Those knights on the ground over there were taken out by the first attack," I continued, pointing. "The others could stay far away and wait for the taunadels to suffocate without water, or they could surround them with shields of Wind until they've finished shooting all of their spines... but neither approach is a quick one."

Our knights watched with stiff expressions as the Gilessenmeyer knights struggled with the taunadels; they really didn't want to face an unfamiliar feybeast.

Leonore, who was in charge of operating intelligence, looked no less uneasy. "What will they summon for us? I never thought I would feel this tense about playing in the Interduchy Tournament..." she uttered. But before she could say much else—

"Gilessenmeyer, complete! Next up, Ehrenfest!"

In response to Rauffen's booming voice, Ehrenfest's apprentice knights climbed onto their highbeasts and went down to the bottom of the arena. They flew once around the perimeter of the grounds, their dark-yellow capes flapping behind them, before settling into place.

Gundolf stepped forward. It seemed we didn't have Fraularm this year, which was good news. Given the screeching ordonnanz she had sent over earlier, I was sure she would have given us the worst feybeast she could imagine.

"I see we do not have Professor Fraularm this year," I said. "That is quite a relief."

Wilfried shook his head. "Nah, Professor Gundolf's the scary one. He knows about all sorts of feybeasts."

"Lord Wilfried is correct," Ignaz agreed. "During our joint research, when he learned that paper can be made from feyplants, he began striving to learn as much about them as possible."

Apparently, Ignaz had then needed to endure a round of very intense questioning about the feyplants found in Ehrenfest. He hadn't been able to answer very well, which had earned him a very exasperated "Are you at all invested in this research?"

"Still, there sure are a lot of people watching this year," Wilfried said.

I gazed around at the audience stands. As he said, there were loads more spectators than usual, and they seemed a lot more excited—likely because the rare feybeasts of minor species that had appeared thus far had produced continually unexpected results, and they couldn't predict what was coming up next. Those from Dunkelfelger were so eager to see that they were all crammed right up against the barrier.

"Even for adult knights, there aren't many chances to encounter feybeasts from other duchies—especially the less famous ones. They must be excited to see how these feybeasts they've never seen before are defeated."

It was then that Gundolf activated the magic circle with his schtappe. It shone with an intensely bright light, then atop it appeared a huge, vibrant tree covered in plenty of rustling leaves.

"Is that a feyplant?"

"Of course. Professor Gundolf would be met with very sharp criticism if he produced a normal tree."

But it wasn't moving... nor was it screaming like an effon... nor did it seem able to suck up mana like a trombe. By all accounts, it appeared to be a plain old tree—not even a fantasy one like a ruelle.

Mm... I wonder if it's going to sprout a face and start talking, because if not, this just looks like a normal tree.

At this rate, I was starting to question whether it was a feyplant at all.

"I've not seen this feyplant before," I said. "What kind is it?"

In my quest to make new, interesting types of paper, I'd gone around Ehrenfest asking our giebess what feyplants lived in their

provinces. My knowledge about the feyplants of other duchies was very limited, though. Concerned, I squinted at Leonore, who was positioned at the center of the apprentice knights. She would be able to recognize it, surely.

“Everyone but Judithe, form weapons for cutting branches—the same you use when hunting trombes!” Leonore called. “Archknights, start building up mana. In order! Alexis, make preparations!” She was clearly and very confidently shouting instructions, so she must have known what they were up against.

She transformed her schtappe into a halberd and, while filling it with mana, continued, “Judithe, at my signal, hit the gumka with the most powerful magic tool we have. As everyone knows, after it takes enough damage, it will extend the many branches hidden behind its leaves. The process will take only a few moments. In that time, cut as many branches as you can—but take care not to touch them. They have thorns that will make your limbs go completely numb.”

“Gumka”? Isn’t that the rubber tree? I’m sure Ferdinand told me about them once... They’re like trombes, but you can’t find them anywhere near Ehrenfest.

“Ignaz, Marianne,” I said, “since Gundolf produced a gumka, does that mean they come from Drewanchel? Or do they grow somewhere else, and he just happens to know about them? I would like to ask about obtaining some gumka bark...”

I’d thought they might have an answer, since they had been working with Gundolf, but neither of them knew.

“We will ask him when we can.”

If this weren’t a game feyplant made from Gundolf’s mana, I’d be shouting, “Focus on getting the bark!” right about now. Gaaahhh. I want rubberrrr!

I gazed longingly at the gumka, contemplating all the wondrous things I could create if only we had rubber. But as I was lost in thought, Lieseleta rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Lady Rozemyne, you are leaning too far forward. And please take care not to appear too excited when you go to Professor Gundolf to obtain information. If you show as much interest as you are now, he will surely manage to steal much of our intelligence.”

She was right—there was a very real danger of that happening. But this was the first gumka I had ever seen, and it had stolen my heart.

“Please speak with Leonore before you ask Professor Gundolf,” Lieseleta continued. “She knows enough to have recalled its name and how to defeat it; I am sure she is familiar with where it grows.”

“Y-You’re right.”

I had only thought of asking Gundolf, since he had made the

gumka, but Leonore surely knew where it grew as well. There was hope.

“Don’t get your hopes up too much, though,” Cornelius warned. “If we learn it’s a rare feyplant that can only be found in some other duchy, then you will need to give up on obtaining it. We would need to send a platoon to gather the resources you want, which is entirely unreasonable. You would not want a group of knights from another duchy coming into Ehrenfest, would you?”

I envisioned Dunkelfelger’s knights coming into our duchy to harvest some plant or another and swiftly agreed. That wasn’t something I ever wanted to happen.

“Perhaps we could trade for the resources, then?” I suggested, but Cornelius immediately shook his head.

“I cannot approve of that. I expect you would accept even the most unfavorable conditions to obtain what you desire.”

My other retainers all agreed. In their words, trading with other duchies was a lot more serious than matters contained within Ehrenfest.

I mean, when it comes to getting what you want, I think anything should go.

As everyone continued to chide me, I returned to watching the match with a bit of a resigned expression. The apprentice knights had already surrounded the gumka and were wielding the same halberds I had seen them use when hunting trombes. They were cautiously keeping their distance, since they didn’t know how far its branches would reach.

The apprentice archknights were still channeling mana into their weapons, which were shining even more brightly than before.

“Can *anyone* do that attack?” I asked.

“Yes. It only requires you to collect mana in your weapon and then unleash it, so anyone can manage it with a bit of practice. That said, the power of the attack changes dramatically based on your mana quantity and number of elements, so there is little point in a layknight or medknight using it—unless the medknight has about as much mana as an archknight, I guess.”

Since you were channeling basically all of your mana into a single attack, it was best to only use it when you knew you could take out the enemy in one blow or when you had people who could cover you while you chugged rejuvenation potions. Our knights had at their disposal the potions left over from the Dedication Ritual, so they would probably be fine.

“Judithe, aim for the leaves that are the most overgrown,” Leonore ordered. “Archknights, do you see where the trunk changes color near the top? At my command, attack that part in order!”

“Understood!”

Once everyone was prepared, Leonore swung down her arm and cried, “Judithe!”

“Hyah!”

From her sling, Judithe shot one of the magic tools left over from our game of ditter against Dunkelfelger. It disappeared into the rustling leaves and caused a tremendous explosion.

The gumka shook as if surprised, and a bunch of thin branches shot out from beneath its leaves. There were probably thirty to forty of them in total, each with the sharp thorns that Leonore had described at the tip.

“Hyah!”

“Graaah!”

The apprentice knights atop their highbeasts swung their halberds around, chopping away the thin branches one after another. This only lasted a few seconds, however, as the branches then retreated back behind the central mass of leaves, whereupon they started wiggling like tentacles and trying to grab the nearby apprentice knights. Out of nowhere, the tree had started to look a lot like a jellyfish.

And the fact that touching its “stingers” makes you go numb only reinforces the comparison! So gumka equals tree jellyfish. Very dangerous. I won’t forget that.

“The branches can’t be cut when they’re retracted!” Leonore shouted. “Fall back! I’ll attack next!”

Once the apprentice knights had retreated, she swung her halberd with a fierce war cry, launching an iridescent bow of mana straight toward the differently colored part of the gumka’s trunk.



There was another explosion, which caused the gumka to shake violently... but there was no shockwave. Had the attack even done anything? I was watching with wide eyes, at a loss, when the thin branches shot back out.

“Go!”

Not letting even a moment go to waste, everyone began swinging their halberds again, trying to sever the remaining branches.

Leonore shouted, “Natalie! Start building up mana!” and then carefully watched the knights while downing rejuvenation potions. It seemed they were going to continue using all-out attacks, but were they actually working? I couldn’t help feeling worried, but Leonore wasn’t hesitating in the slightest with her instructions.

“Alexis!”

“Hyaaaaaaah!”

This time, Alexis attacked with his mana. There was a really bright light but again, no shockwave.

After weathering the blow, the gumka shot out its branches for the third time. The apprentice knights attacked them until they retracted, then backed away in preparation for the next all-out strike.

“Traugott, prepare! Natalie, go!”

As instructed, Traugott started building up his mana, while Natalie shot out hers. Seeing all these attacks back-to-back helped me see how true it was that one’s mana quantity and elements impacted their strength. Although every attack was a variety of colors, they weren’t all the *same* colors, and they struck the gumka with varying degrees of power.

“That should be most of the dangerous branches dealt with...” Angelica muttered as the gumka responded to Natalie’s attack. “There aren’t as many coming out now.” She looked somewhat antsy, probably because she wanted to join the fight.

“Judithe, use our secret weapon to get rid of the leaves!” Leonore shouted. “Everyone, keep your distance! Matthias, prepare your mana!”

“Understood!”

I’d expected Traugott to unleash an attack next, but no. Judithe took a fist-sized magic tool out from the pouch on her waist and used her sling to propel it toward the gumka. It shot up into the leaves with such ease that it looked as though it had been sucked inside... and then erupted in an explosion louder than any of the mana attacks. The crown of the gumka burst into flames all at once.

“Wh-What was that?!” Cornelius cried.

“They’re using magic tools in speed ditter?!” Angelica exclaimed. And they weren’t the only ones who were so surprised; a stir ran

through the entire audience. It reminded me of something Matthias had said—that not many duchies used magic tools for speed ditter.

“That was a magic tool Hartmut made for our ditter match with Dunkelfelger,” I explained. “It would have been a waste not to use it, so we decided to incorporate it into our Interduchy Tournament strategies. I see it was even more powerful than expected.”

“You were willing to use that against another duchy?” Cornelius asked. “Talk about merciless.”

“It was our ultimate secret weapon, to be used only if we were on the brink of defeat.”

The gumka’s bushy foliage was burnt away entirely, but that was about it. Although the upper part of the trunk was engulfed in flames, it didn’t look at all damaged, and the thinner part was the same as before.

Just how strong are gumkas?!

As I stared on in shock, the very top of the trunk, located a little bit above the lighter-colored part, began to shine faintly. At the same time, some of its remaining branches began to sway; it was trying to make more of the “tentacles” we’d seen before.

“We’ll take it down before they finish growing! Traugott, Matthias, attack from above! Everyone, prepare your shields!”

“Understood!”

Traugott and Matthias sped upward in perfect unison, keeping an eye on each other all the while. Their weapons, which were shining a variety of colors, painted a beautiful arc in the sky behind them.

“Hyaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

They both descended on the gumka while swinging their halberds, their combined efforts assaulting it with twice as much mana as each of the previous attacks. Rainbowlike light pierced the feyplant like a bolt of lightning before rupturing into another cacophonous explosion—except this one was almost immediately drowned out by an even louder crackling as the gumka’s trunk was torn to shreds.

Moments later, the gumka vanished, as did the light of the magic circle it had come from. The same couldn’t be said for the shock waves, though; our apprentice knights were still desperately taking cover behind their shields when Rauffen made his announcement.

“Ehrenfest, finished!”

“Well done,” Sylvester said to the apprentices when they returned from their game. “That was great ditter.”

As it turned out, Ehrenfest’s apprentices had made a pretty big impression during their ditter match. While the apprentice knights of other duchies had fumbled and wasted time in the face of the lesser-

known feybeasts, ours had attacked confidently and without delay.

“I never thought someone could be so well read in the fey creatures of other duchies, Leonore.”

“Your praise honors me, but I was not the only one who recognized the gumka. The apprentice knights all studied as well so that they would know exactly what to do and could pass along the most important details.” She turned to look at them, overflowing with pride. “I likely stood out because I was in a position of leadership, but we would have claimed victory no matter who was taking the lead. Plus, our knowledge of fey creatures will not be lost next year when I graduate, nor the year after that.”

Leonore had compiled her fey creature research into documents that were now stored in the common room’s bookcase, meaning her knowledge could be readily shared with future students as well. She could rest easy knowing that her hard work would benefit Ehrenfest forevermore.

“As the aub, I must say that your efforts fill me with pride,” Sylvester said.

With a nod of agreement, a higher-up of the Knight’s Order who was here in Karstedt’s place stepped forward. “Your knowledge was not all that you displayed either. Everyone followed their orders to perfection, and your coordination was superb. I was particularly impressed by the speed and precision with which the lay- and medknights dispatched the branches lured out by the archknights. You all fought well enough that I expect you could all join a trombe hunt immediately upon coming of age. It is clear to me how much you have all grown stronger. Continue as you are.”

“Sir!”

The apprentice knights exchanged proud, accomplished smiles, having been praised even by the Knight’s Order. They had worked together and gotten top results.

“Everyone, feel free to watch the other duchies play while guarding Charlotte and Rozemyne,” Sylvester said. “Wilfried, come with me.”

As I watched them go off to socialize with other duchies, I couldn’t help but wonder whether I should have gone with them.

“Oh, Sister,” Charlotte giggled, “you do not need to be so concerned. This is to help Wilfried adjust to socializing—and presumably to deal with those who wish to propose to me.” She then took my hand and guided me back to the audience stands. We were surrounded by our retainers and apprentice knights, so there was no chance of anyone approaching us.

Charlotte smiled from where she was standing beside me and gazed down at the lower portion of the arena. “As so many top-

ranking duchies have graciously pointed out, Ehrenfest's rise through the duchy rankings is still entirely because of your accomplishments. Our current position cannot be considered stable until we have resolved our internal situation—and my future partner cannot be decided until our nobles have either succeeded or failed in reforming their perspectives.”

Other duchies still weren't sure whether to accept Ehrenfest as a top-ranking duchy or expect our position to nosedive in the years to come. As a result, the number of men trying to propose to Charlotte was exceedingly large. The pool was just too broad to begin with.

“It will require a pretty considerable turnabout in opinion, but I would like everyone to accept us as worthy of being a top-ranking duchy *before* I graduate,” Charlotte said. “That will make deciding on my partner much easier.”

It was best for both parties if she married into a duchy that Ehrenfest could wrangle to some degree, but we weren't yet sure who would end up in our league.

“You know, Charlotte... never before have I considered Ehrenfest as being in a particularly dire state. Because we stayed neutral throughout the civil war, we did not need to undergo any major changes, unlike the duchies that were defeated. However, I expect this purge to force a significant change one way or the other.”

The purge of the former Veronica faction and the punishments being doled out to many of its remaining members had surely plunged Ehrenfest into a state of chaos. We needed to use this opportunity to reform our collective awareness and make things more efficient.

“However,” I continued, “this matter can wait until we return to Ehrenfest. For now, let us enjoy the rest of the Interduchy Tournament.”

“Yes, Sister.”

We returned to watching the ditter matches and marveled at one unfamiliar fey creature after another. It made for a very enjoyable experience, and the educated apprentice knights taught me the proper method for defeating each summon.

“You all sure have learned a lot, huh?” Cornelius said to the knights, impressed. “Leonore must be an excellent teacher.”

Leonore grinned from ear to ear. She and Cornelius were giving off such “boyfriend and girlfriend reunited at last” vibes that, for a brief moment, I thought it was a good thing that Damuel wasn't here to see them.

“Oh, that reminds me,” I said. “Angelica, you came here to see how much Traugott has grown, right? How was he?”

Some listened with bated breath, eager to witness a new *Royal Academy Love Stories* tale in the making. How did Angelica see

Traugott now, after she had said that her partner needed to be stronger than Cornelius?

Angelica placed a hand on her cheek and smiled. "He was an excellent reminder for me to appreciate just how strong Lord Bonifatius really is."

Alas, it seemed that things would not develop as everyone hoped.

"Thus concludes the last game of ditler," Rauffen said. "We would now like to demonstrate a ritual performed by Dunkelfelger's knights."

Right on cue, a band of blue-capes swooped down toward the bottom of the arena with an emphatic battle cry. They did a lap of the grounds, like the apprentices had done before playing ditler, then dismounted and dismissed their highbeasts.

Aub Dunkelfelger stood at the center of the knights, who formed a circle around him. Their movements were highly practiced; I could tell that every single person was standing in their assigned place.

Nobody had their *schtappes* out yet, but Aub Dunkelfelger alone was holding a weapon; Leidenschaft's spear was gripped firmly in his right hand. He must have stolen—er, *borrowed* it from Dunkelfelger's temple. The feystones in the spearhead were blue even though the Dedication Ritual had just come and gone, meaning he had probably supplied it with his own mana for the Interduchy Tournament.

The aub thumped the butt of the spear against the ground and said in a powerful voice, "There are many adult knights who do not know this ritualistic dance, as they were never taught it by Rauffen. We do not believe its results can be fully understood through a research presentation; thus, we have determined it best for Dunkelfelger's Knight's Order to provide a demonstration. Behold a true ritual and divine instrument, which had so nearly been forgotten by the changing times!"

A cheer louder than expected resounded throughout the arena, taking me completely by surprise. I gazed around and saw that every single duchy seemed interested—pretty much the entire audience was crowding at the very front of the stands, eager to see Dunkelfelger's ritual.

"Under normal circumstances, one would perform the ritual and obtain its blessings days before they are needed, so as to train with and grow accustomed to their effects, and to recover mana in preparation for the coming battle."

Too many blessings could make people lose control of their bodies, as we had seen with Ehrenfest's apprentices, and normal rejuvenation potions didn't restore mana immediately.

"However," the aub continued, "Dunkelfelger's knights no longer need such leeway. Through extensive practice, we have calculated

roughly how much mana is required to obtain the blessings, and by increasing the number of participants in the ritual, we have reduced the mana cost to a reasonable level.”

Apparently, this would allow them to perform the demonstration even without rejuvenation potions. It was just one surprise after another. I could see why Sieglinde had resented me a little for causing this mess.

“In addition, this is a *true* divine instrument borrowed from the temple: Leidenschaft’s spear,” Aub Dunkelfelger declared, grasping the instrument firmly in both hands. He then began filling it with mana, at which point the entire spear—not just the head—turned blue and began to crackle with electric light.

“Wh-What in the world is going on?!”

“You can do that with a divine instrument from the temple?!”

The nobles basically never went to the temple, nor did they have any other opportunities to see the divine instruments up close, so there were some loud cries of surprise when Leidenschaft’s spear practically sprang to life.

“Grant power to those of us going into battle!” Aub Dunkelfelger roared, his spear glowing an even brighter blue. At the same time, the knights all shouted, “*Lanze!*” and turned their *schtappes* into spears.

“We are those who offer prayers and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” came the familiar introduction. Then, at once, they all thumped their spears against the ground. “Grant us power so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Angriff’s mighty power, which is second to none. Grant us speed so that we might obtain victory. Grant us Steifebrise’s speed, which is second to none.”

They twirled their spears before once again striking them against the ground. Then, they scraped the tips against their feystone armor, creating a loud, metallic screeching sound. It was the same process as I’d seen before, but the adults were far more experienced than the apprentices; not only were they acting in perfect unison, they even performed the dance smoothly and with grace despite the intensity of their actions.

The ritual was by no means new to me, but this one felt entirely different.

“Fight!” Aub Dunkelfelger declared, raising Leidenschaft’s spear high above his head. The surrounding knights let out cheers as they did the same with their own weapons, and a pillar of blue light shot up into the sky. Some of the blessing then rained down on them, while a portion flew elsewhere.

This was a familiar sight for rituals performed in the Royal Academy but not for those performed elsewhere. There were some shocked exclamations even from among Dunkelfelger’s audience, and

Ehrenfest's adults similarly stared at the light in disbelief.

"So that's one of those 'pillars of light,' huh..." Sylvester muttered, having at some point moved to stand behind us. It was one of those things you could read about but wouldn't truly understand unless you saw one for yourself.

Charlotte nodded. "They invariably occur when rituals are performed in the Royal Academy. They're very strange, aren't they?"

Even among the students, not many had seen this light before. Outside of Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger, it had only been witnessed by the archduke candidates and archnoble apprentices who had participated in the Dedication Ritual—and those who lived in dormitories relatively close to Dunkelfelger's, I supposed.

"I see. If Rozemyne has been causing stuff like this to happen left and right, it's no surprise that people keep going on about her being a saint or the avatar of a goddess or whatever."

Rauffen then created a fey creature, which Dunkelfelger's knights swiftly attacked. Their speed, power, and resilience in controlling so many blessings put them on an infinitely higher level than the students, like the earth compared to the sky.

To wrap up the demonstration, Hannelore stepped forward and performed the ceremony for offering their victory to the gods, wherein the blessings were returned. She turned her schtappe into Verfuheremeer's staff and spun it through the air in a gentle circle. The crashing of waves could be heard as mana rose from the knights and simmered up into the sky.

"Thus concludes our ritual, which has been passed down through Dunkelfelger's history," Aub Dunkelfelger declared, the drained spear in hand, his voice resounding throughout the arena.

The audience erupted in cheers of awe and excitement.

My First Awards Ceremony

“The awards ceremony will be performed next,” Rauffen announced. “Students, descend to the grounds after fifth bell rings.” He was instructing the audience with a voice-amplifying tool, so even the bustling crowds, still excited about Dunkelfelger’s ritual, were able to hear him.

“We should clean up in the meantime,” I said.

Just like last year, the short gap between the end of dinner and fifth bell was used for a quick cleanup. The apprentice scholars put away the important magic tools and such they had taken out for their presentations, while the apprentice attendants put away the teacups and sweets that had been put out for guests.

While everyone else was working busily, I sat down and got some rest. I had been on my feet the entire time I was watching dinner, so my legs were aching.

But I’m not feeling sick or light-headed, so yeah—I really am healthy now.

Come fifth bell, everyone stopped cleaning and started making their way to the grounds for the awards ceremony. Seeing everyone descend on their highbeasts was breathtaking—the sky was filled with capes of every color.

“Wilfried, Charlotte, I’ll entrust you with guiding everyone,” I said. If every duchy’s student population descended at once, the sky would get too crowded, which sometimes caused struggles and small fights to break out. My siblings had taken charge last year, so having them do it again felt like the best way to avoid trouble.

“Sure,” Wilfried replied. “You can stay sitting with Father. You’ll need all the rest you can get before Uncle lectures you later.”

“I would rather you say he’s going to *praise* me! The compliments will come first, you know.”

Or so I wanted to believe, but he had tried to pinch my cheeks the second we had reunited. If even Wilfried thought I was guaranteed a lecture, I probably needed to come up with some kind of countermeasure.

How about... the moment he tries to scold me, I’ll stick a spoonful of consommé in his mouth! Or maybe I could start a rebellion, using the shumil to drown him out and return fire. Yeah, that should work.

As I was ironing out the details of my battle plan, Sylvester poked

my cheek. He looked a little nostalgic as he said, “No need to strain yourself, Rozemyne.”

“Hm?”

“As long as you get the king’s praise while you’re up on the stage, Ferdinand won’t be able to lecture you. Use it as your shield. Besides, this is the third year you’ve come first-in-class—but because of us, it’s only your first awards ceremony.”

I thought back to what Ferdinand had told me about his Royal Academy days. Coming first-in-class had granted him a rare, precious opportunity to get praise from his father.

“You go too far sometimes,” Sylvester continued, “but you’re still working as hard as you can. I’m sure he’ll be nice to you—at least on this one occasion. He hasn’t read your reports to Ehrenfest, so he shouldn’t know the details of all the things you’ve done. The lecture can wait until you’re back home.”

His reasoning hurt a little. “Well, um... I *did* mention quite a lot in my letters to him. Am I still going to be okay?”

“You only wrote what was safe for Ahrensbach’s inspection, right? Pretty sure you’re fine—unless you willingly said more than you needed to.”

I didn’t respond. No way could I admit that I’d more or less signed my own death warrant in shining ink. My silence must have spoken volumes, though, because...

“Oh. That’s your fault, then. Enjoy the lecture.”

“Eep...”

“Anyway, you should get going. When the king praises you, just say, ‘This is a great honor.’ Don’t be rude, and *please* don’t say anything incriminating. Understand?”

After warning me over and over again, Sylvester finally saw me off. I descended to the grounds by highbeast, with retainers all around me. It was nice that I could tell where I needed to go just by the mass of colored capes.

Upon landing my Pandabus, I lined up with the rest of Ehrenfest. Wilfried and Charlotte had descended first, and the others must have gathered soon after. They were all chatting about how they hoped we would get plenty of honor students this year.

Eventually, the royal family arrived, surrounded by a platoon of black-caped knights who were carefully eyeing their surroundings. The royal highbeasts descended to the stage one by one, their wings spread wide. First to land were the king and his first wife, then Sigiswald, Adolphine, Nahelache, Anastasius, and Eglantine.

I didn’t really notice before, but now that they’re all together like this... pretty much the entire royal family came to the Dedication Ritual, huh?

The only ones who hadn’t attended were the king’s wives. On

reflection, maybe the ritual really *had* been crazy.

“Ewigeliebe the God of Life grants his harsh judgment each winter, and your gathering here today means you have all endured it,” the king said, beginning the speech in the same way as last year. His voice, which was resounding throughout the arena thanks to a sound-amplifying magic tool, sounded stronger and more lively than during the Dedication Ritual. Assuming it wasn’t just my imagination, I was glad to know he was feeling better.

“I shall now grant this year’s ditter awards,” declared a black-caped man, who was probably a Sovereign noble; it was time for the top three duchies to be announced. “First place: Dunkelfelger.”

Dunkelfelger’s placement was both fair and magnificently well deserved—not only had they learned to obtain blessings on their own, but they had also done an incredible amount of research into fey creatures. Nobody could deny the speed with which they had completed their match, so everyone acknowledged their victory.

“Second place: Klassenberg.”

Klassenberg also knew a lot about fey creatures, and its students had attacked without hesitation. They surely had years and years of research available to them. On top of that, luck had absolutely been on their side; their feybeast hadn’t been tough or hard to beat like the gumka, so they had breezed through their match. Their placement was only half due to skill, in my opinion.

“Third place: Ehrenfest. Representatives, come forth!”

Immediately, a buzz ran through the arena. Ehrenfest had come in sixth in the mock battle but was now being awarded third place. Not once in Ehrenfest’s history had it ranked so highly in the Interduchy Tournament.

“This is only because they knew the fey creature ahead of time,” came a voice from the front. “Feyplants were a critical part of their research with Drewanchel, after all.”

“They surely asked Professor Gundolf to summon a creature of their choice.”

A group of students began to giggle maliciously, and an ominous feeling spread through the crowd. Leonore, Matthias, and the others were all wearing stiff expressions.

I wanted to protest. “If we were skilled enough to perform such bribery ahead of time, Ehrenfest would not be mocked for its poor diplomacy skills,” I would say. “Ditter results are fair and square; the better players win!” But the insults were coming from the front, which meant they were from top-ranking duchies.

As I debated whether to speak up or swallow my words, someone from another duchy intervened. “Nobody could rig their match in such a manner; the professors do not know whom they will produce a

feybeast for until right before the tournament. I find it off-putting that you would demean others simply because your own duchy's knights were so incompetent."

Another voice spoke out in agreement. "Luck decides which fey creature a duchy will receive, and Ehrenfest was made to fight especially challenging ones this year and the last. Anyone with eyes can recognize their strength."

Right! That's exactly what I wanted to say!

The apprentice knights who had taken lessons with us and watched the game carefully knew just how hard it was to take down a gumka. We now had several duchies in our corner, which made those who had so openly criticized us fall silent.

"At least *some* people understand..." Leonore remarked with a smile, eliciting happy nods of agreement from Ehrenfest's other apprentice knights. She and Alexis then took the stage as our duchy's representatives.

To think, when I was a first-year, our apprentice knights barely ever cooperated and were a shambles against Dunkelfelger. Everyone sure has been working hard.

They had studied to make up for their weaknesses, cast aside the shackles of our duchy's factions, and endured brutal training—but we couldn't forget the role that Karstedt and Bonifatius had played too. It was because of their heroic efforts that the apprentice knights had grown stronger, even if our wizened elders had mostly been acting to prevent a future of disarray after learning that the Royal Academy's changing standards were impacting the quality of new recruits.

"Your battles were glorious," Raublut said, commending the apprentices as commander of the Sovereignty's knights. "I pray that you stay this path and consider joining the Sovereign Knight's Order."

The representatives returned with clear blue feystones that looked a lot like medals. "This is my first time receiving such an award," Leonore said.

I smiled. "Let us show Grandfather, who agreed to train everyone despite being in retirement. I am sure he will be pleased."

"Indeed."

After the chatter quieted down, it was time for the research awards. These had the greatest influence on noble society and were given out based on which projects the Sovereign nobles found the most impressive.

"First place: Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest's joint research on rituals and divine protections. Second place: Gilessenmeyer's research on mana-amplifying magic tools. Third place: Ahrensbach and Ehrenfest's joint research on making magic tools more mana-efficient."

The speaker then asked for the representatives of each project to

come forth. I didn't know what to do; I was supposed to be representing Ehrenfest this time, but I couldn't be in two places at once.

"Um, Wilfried... could you be our representative for our research with Dunkelfelger? I need to go up for our work with Ahrensbach."

"Nah, nah, nah. Hold on. You were *central* to that research. Either go just as our first-place representative or represent us for both awards. I don't want to steal my little sister's accomplishments."

So, having no other choice, I approached the stage with Leonore as my guard knight. "Is it really okay for Wilfried to stay behind...?" I asked her.

"Of course, Lady Rozemyne," she replied. "You are the one who did the research, after all."

Lestilaut was acting as Dunkelfelger's representative. He was expressionless, but he seemed more deflated than usual and wouldn't make eye contact with me. I could imagine Sieglinde had given him a particularly harsh scolding after her conversation with us... Staying silent didn't seem like a great idea.

"Isn't this a surprise, Lord Lestilaut? I never thought we would come in first place."

"I did..." Lestilaut replied. He shot me a glance, then sighed and stood up straight. In an instant, his glumness vanished, replaced with the airs of a proper Dunkelfelger archduke candidate. "Rozemyne, you —"

"And *I* did not expect *our* research to come in third," came an unexpected voice. "How delightful, Lady Rozemyne."

"Wha?" I said. "Lady Detlinde?"

I didn't have a clue why she was joining us onstage as a representative—and with a shameless look on her face too. I searched for Raimund, baffled, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Um, should *Raimund* not be Ahrensbach's representative?" I asked. "I don't believe anyone else from Ahrensbach contributed to the research whatsoever."

Detlinde met my doubts with a peal of refined laughter. "Ohoho! Raimund fears the public eye, so I agreed to take his place. And as my fiancé oversaw this research, I see no reason why I should not act as Ahrensbach's representative." It was definitely an excuse; she had probably been so forceful that Raimund just gave in.

Geez, Raimund. You need to market yourself more at times like this!

Feeling angry at Detlinde for stealing someone else's credit, I went and stood in line next to Lestilaut. "My apologies, Lord Lestilaut. What were you saying?"

"Nothing. Pay it no mind."

An unfamiliar man stepped out from the platoon beside the royal

family. The knight commander had addressed the apprentice knights during their portion of the awards ceremony, so this was probably a representative of the scholars.

“Dunkelfelger, Ehrenfest—your research has made us see the rituals once abandoned to time in a new light and illuminated the requirements for obtaining divine protections from the gods,” the man said. “It is fascinating beyond words that having more protections changes the efficiency of one’s mana usage. As the royal family’s participation in your ritual should demonstrate, this research will play a key role in Yurgenschmidt’s future.”

He went on to detail the parts of our research that inspired the most awe, noting in particular our findings on how one’s divine protections affected one’s mana expenditure. He then said that he hoped we would continue our work so that growing students could get as many divine protections as possible.

That said, is there really much more we can research?

“This is your prize,” the man concluded. “Continue striving for the sake of our country.” He handed me a light-yellow feystone, which was noticeably different from the medal that Leonore had received. It was heavy in my hands.

I got Leonore to hold on to my medal for me, then moved to stand next to Detlinde while the Sovereign scholar spoke to Gilessenmeyer, the second-place winner.

“Third place. Ahrensbach, Ehrenfest—your research has made it possible to run mana-intensive magic tools more efficiently. Many of your innovations are superior to current methods, and their potential applications reach far beyond what was demonstrated today. We pray for even further improvements and optimizations.”

So, the Sovereign scholars were more interested in the basis of Raimund’s research—mana conservation—than in the magic tools themselves. Thinking about it, every single award-winning presentation had been about making magic tools more efficient or increasing one’s mana capacity. The mana crisis really was a matter of grave importance here in Yurgenschmidt.

We returned to the crowd with both medals, at which point the winners of the next awards were announced. These were for the duchies that had received the most visitors and served as the best hosts. Unfortunately, Ehrenfest didn’t place this time; the results instead matched the duchy rankings, with Klassenberg in first, Dunkelfelger in second, and Drewanchel in third.

“I thought Ehrenfest did rather well this year,” I said, pursing my lips, but Brunhilde shook her head with an air of ambivalence.

“Our duchy simply lacks an appropriate number of attendants and archduke candidates. We are forced to leave guests waiting, which

lowers their satisfaction. Even coming close to the top scorers is going to be beyond us.”

Our sweets, trends, and the appeal of early business discussions meant we had plenty of means to draw in customers, but we didn’t have enough people to host them all. Apparently, this kind of thing was outright impossible if your duchy didn’t have a large enough population to begin with. I simply had to agree with Brunhilde when she said we couldn’t make more apprentice attendants appear out of thin air.

Plus, Ehrenfest’s citizenry is small even for a middle duchy.

We would need to think about how to increase our population as quickly as possible, even if only by a little.

Once all of the awards related to the Interduchy Tournament had been given out, it was finally time for the Royal Academy’s honor students to be announced. In a sense, all of the achievements thus far had been for entire duchies, whereas these were for individuals.

“I shall announce this year’s top students,” came a voice. “Those named, step forward.”

Among the sixth-years, an archscholar from Drewanchel came first-in-class overall. I’d thought the title would go to an archduke candidate, so that came as quite a surprise to me. Lestilaut was then announced as having come first-in-class for the archduke candidate course—another surprise, considering how obsessed he had been with illustrating *A Ditter Story*.

Lord Lestilaut’s grades are so high that he beat all the other archduke candidates in his year? That’s news to me.

Had he focused on studying instead of obsessing over art, I thought, he might have come first-in-class overall. I didn’t dwell on that thought for much longer, however, as Leonore and Alexis were named as honor students.

“Well done, Alexis,” Wilfried said.

“Congratulations, Leonore,” I added.

“It is all thanks to you, Lady Rozemyne,” Leonore replied. She then headed toward the stage with Alexis while everyone praised them.

Next were the fifth-years. Their first-in-class student was announced first, then the honor students were listed in order of the duchy rankings.

“Ehrenfest the Eighth... Brunhilde, Natalie, and Matthias.”

“Brunhilde, Matthias—congratulations, you two.”

Matthias had been recognized as an honor student last year as well, but this was a new experience for Brunhilde. Her amber eyes widened in surprise and then grew teary as a smile spread across her

lips.

“This is my first time being made an honor student...”

“Indeed,” I said. “You have worked very hard interacting with top-ranking duchies. I’m glad your efforts have been recognized.”

“I am honored, Lady Rozemyne,” Brunhilde said, her cheeks flushing with happiness. Her pretty smile made her look more flowery than usual.

“An honor student, hm?” Matthias uttered. In stark contrast to Brunhilde, he didn’t look very pleased at all. Maybe he had set his heart on something higher, but a mednoble being selected as an honor student was already an exceedingly rare feat. I thought he should have been happier.

“You should delight in this achievement, Matthias,” I said. “As your lady, I could not be more proud of you.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Matthias knelt. He took my hand and, looking at me sincerely with his blue eyes, respectfully pressed his forehead against it. It was the most extreme form of gratitude a noble could express.

“Wha? Matthias, what are you...?”

“Lady Rozemyne, this honor would not be mine if you had not so considerately rescued us. You have my honor and my complete and utter gratitude, my lady.”

Please, stop! This kind of gratitude is bad for my heart! And you’re standing out! You’re standing out so much!

“I... I understand, so go and join the others,” I said, frantically pulling my hand away. “Everyone is waiting.”

By the time Brunhilde, Matthias, and Natalie made it up onstage, the fourth-years were already being called. Laurenz and Ignaz were recognized as honor students too.

“Lady Rozemyne, I would like to kneel and offer my utmost gratitude as well,” Laurenz said teasingly. “Would you permit me?”

I glared at him. “If you save your gratitude for when there are fewer people around, I’ll make sure you get an extra helping of meat on your plate come dinnertime.”

“Understood,” he replied, holding back laughter as he took the stage with Ignaz, who had received some congratulations from Wilfried.

“Next, the third-year who placed first-in-class overall,” said the announcer. “Rozemyne, the archduke candidate of Ehrenfest.”

I also placed first-in-class for the archduke candidate and scholar courses. Some were in awe at hearing my name over and over, while others groaned as if to say, “Again?”

Shortly after, the honor students were announced—and “Wilfried of Ehrenfest” was among them.

“Oh, congratulations, Lady Rozemyne!” Philine exclaimed. “At last, your first awards ceremony! Go forth and accept your honors.” She and Lieseletha were a lot more excited about my achievements than I was.

“Rozemyne. Your hand,” Wilfried said. He then started escorting me to the stage while my retainers saw me off, smiling. I could tell from all the whispers that we were drawing a lot of attention.

“So, that’s the Ehrenfest girl, huh? The archduke candidate who invited the royal family to a Dedication Ritual...”

“She missed the past two awards ceremonies because of something or other, right?”

Wait... Am I drawing attention for the wrong reasons?!

From what I could tell, people were whispering about everything *except* my being first-in-class. Their hushed voices sent a shiver down my spine, and I started to wish that I’d skipped out on this year’s awards ceremony too.

“Straighten your back,” Wilfried said quietly, coming to a stop alongside the other honor students. “You’ll be alone from this point on.”

With my hand now free, I slowly climbed the stage, making sure to move as gracefully as I could. After reaching the top, I gazed around and saw that I was drawing as much attention from the guardians up in the stands as I was from the students in the audience. The weight of having so many eyes on me was intense, but I stood up straight and tried to maintain my nicest smile.

Guhhh... This is nerve-racking. I really should have sat this one out.

I was already drained—but when I reached the row of royals, Eglantine gave me the most spectacular smile. I suddenly felt renewed, and it was with that newfound vigor that I knelt in front of the king.

The king looked down at me in turn. His face seemed much healthier than before, and there was more color to his cheeks. There was kindness in his eyes, and the tone in which he spoke was especially peaceful.

“Rozemyne, archduke candidate of Ehrenfest. You have obtained extraordinarily high grades for three consecutive years—and this year, you participated in joint research with Dunkelfelger, Drewanchel, *and* Ahrensbach. Your hard work and contributions to Yurgenschmidt’s future are worth immense praise.”

Maybe it was because everyone always scolded me for causing trouble or doing things I shouldn’t, but... having the king himself praise me and say I was making meaningful contributions to the country made me feel so warm inside. And it was clear that he was speaking from the heart rather than just being polite.

I'm helpful. Everything I've done has been helpful.

"It is my honor to have aided the Zent," I replied.

Great applause filled the arena. After securing the king's permission, I stood up and turned to the audience. Not just the students but also the adults in the stands were clapping for me. Among them, I could see Sylvester, the knights, and the parents. At the opposite end of the arena, standing among Ahrensbach's light-violet capes, I spotted faint traces of ocher. I squinted my eyes in an attempt to get a better look and saw Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus all clapping as well.

Ah. Sylvester and Ferdinand are happy for me too.

There were so, so many people here praising my results in the Royal Academy. In truth, it was something I'd never experienced before. My anxiety was quickly replaced with absolute joy, and as my heart warmed, I was overcome with a feeling like everything in the world was good.

Right. I'll work hard next year too.

The awards ceremony had restored my hope and feelings of optimism.

Dinner with Ferdinand

“Could we place the food-preserving magic tool here? It would allow the trolley to pass through without incident.”

“Has there been a change in how many retainers he is bringing?”

The moment we returned from the Interduchy Tournament, my retainers began preparing the tea party room. I glanced around and then nodded; everything was perfect. Wilfried and Sylvester were here too, waiting for Ferdinand.

Partway through directing the preparations, Rihyarda turned to the other students who had returned with us and said, “You have your own arrangements for dinner, do you not? Go to your rooms for now.”

The students did as instructed. Soon enough, aside from Wilfried, Sylvester, and me, the only other people in the tea party room were adult attendants like Rihyarda, Sylvester’s retainers, and those of the Knight’s Order who would be guarding us during our meal.

A bell rang from outside the tea party room.

“Lord Ferdinand has arrived,” announced Sylvester’s attendant who had been waiting by the door. He allowed our guests to enter, and into the tea party room came Justus, Ferdinand, and Eckhart. Also with them was a man I didn’t recognize, pushing a trolley with a large preservation magic tool atop it. He was probably one of Ferdinand’s retainers from Ahrensbach.

“Welcome home, Ferdinand,” I said.

Ferdinand stared at me for a moment, surprised, and then gave a hesitant “Yes...”

“That won’t do. You should say something like ‘It’s good to be back.’ Proper greetings are important, are they not?”

“It is... good to be back,” he forced out, looking very reluctant all the while. He then turned away from me and started greeting Wilfried and Sylvester. “I am going to be in your care tonight. My apologies for the burden. Wilfried, I need not introduce you to Justus or Eckhart, correct? The other man with us is Sergius. He serves me as an attendant in Ahrensbach and is the son of Lady Letizia’s head attendant.”

That meant he probably wasn’t a member of Georgine’s faction. I examined him casually. He had blue-green hair, yellow-green eyes, and a peaceful, attendant-like smile.

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” Sergius said, concluding his greeting and introduction.

Sylvester proceeded to offer Ferdinand his seat. He then gestured for Wilfried and me to sit as well before turning to the door. “I need to go eat dinner with the students, but I’ll be back once that’s over. Ferdinand, let’s go at least one day without over-scolding Rozemyne, alright?”

Ferdinand watched Sylvester hurry out of the room and then muttered, “If you need to be elsewhere, then why waste your time here waiting for me...?”

“Probably because he wanted to see you again more than anything,” I said. “But putting that aside... As you saw—and as you asked—I came first-in-class again this year. Two of our joint research projects also received awards. Now, praise me.”

Before the inevitable lecture began, I wanted to receive some praise. After that, I would be able to endure any amount of scolding. Sylvester had even confirmed that Ferdinand would compliment me as long as I outlined my accomplishments, so I puffed out my chest and bragged my heart out.

Except, rather than praising me... Ferdinand gave me a swift flick to the forehead.

“What was that for?!”

“Is it not obvious that I must interrogate and scold you before uttering even a word of praise?” he said. He reached toward me in what could only be an attempt to pinch my cheeks, so I hurriedly covered my face.

“Sylvester *just* told you not to chastise me today, didn’t he? At the very least, start with some compliments. I am prepared to listen to a lengthy lecture afterward.”

Ferdinand shook his head, exasperated. “I do not care how *prepared* you are to be lectured. I would rather you grow accustomed to not doing things that will get you scolded in the first place.”

I pursed my lips. This didn’t make sense. I’d mentioned my achievements loud and clear, but Ferdinand still hadn’t said anything even remotely positive.

“That is precisely why I think you should praise me first. If not even coming first-in-class is good enough, then what is?!” I demanded, exploding at him in dissatisfaction.

Ferdinand paused for a moment. Then, in a voice completely devoid of emotion, he said, “You did very well.”

No! That’s not the praise I was hoping for!

“There was no heart in that whatsoever!” I cried. “You leave me no choice—I’ll use the tournament shumil to—”

“I apologize for that, Rozemyne,” he said all of a sudden. “It was

my error that I could not stop her from stealing the magic tool you intended to give to another.” His face was twisted in the same bitter expression I always saw when he spoke about Veronica, and at that moment, I realized he had seen Detlinde as her grandmother when she stole the stuffed toy from me.

Eep... I must have brought some traumatic memories to the surface.

“Erm, Ferdinand... I want you to praise me, not apologize. The way I see it, there is no reason for you to feel responsible for her actions.”

“But...”

“Did something happen?” Wilfried asked. He hadn’t been within earshot at the time.

“Nothing significant,” I replied. “Basically...”

Wilfried spent a moment listening to my overview of the situation, then said, “Yeah, that really isn’t your fault, Uncle.”

“See? Wilfried agrees with me. But we can forget about praise and gratitude for now. Let me show you your room.” I decided to move the conversation along—it seemed that Ferdinand was going to keep apologizing forever—and guided everyone over to one of the screens in the room. “Rihyarda worked very hard on this.”

“Yes, milady—because *you* insisted that we help Lord Ferdinand rest as well as possible,” Rihyarda added. She must have been trying to lighten the mood, as she cackled and started explaining the accommodations for Ferdinand and his attendants.

She continued, “Here, we have prepared a place for Lord Ferdinand to sleep. Naturally, there are no bed-curtains, but the screens should allow you to relax at least somewhat.” She then noted where to put belongings, daily-use magic tools, and so on. That part was more for attendants, so I tugged on Ferdinand’s sleeve to get his attention and pointed at the bench.

“Ferdinand, I brought this from Ehrenfest for you to use today.”

“It was finished...?” he asked.

“Yes. I expect it to be far more comfortable than other benches or sofas. Do try sitting on it.”

Ferdinand sat down with great interest, then began squeezing and pushing against the cushioning. We were now roughly face-to-face, which made his sickly pallor all the clearer. He sounded sincere as he said, “Ah, yes. This is good,” but his exhaustion was too much for him to hide.

Has he been chugging tons of ultra-nasty potions?

I was still analyzing Ferdinand when Wilfried quietly asked, “Rozemyne, what is that?” It was his first time seeing the mattress bench.

“It is a new creation that I asked my Gutenbergs to make.

Ferdinand ordered it some time ago, but he moved to Ahrensbach before it was finished.”

Ferdinand then interjected, “You may feel it, if you are curious.” He was stroking the mattress with a hint of what may have been pride.

Wilfried approached, a noticeable glint in his eyes. Oswald, his retainer, looked similarly intrigued.

“If you rest here, Ferdinand, then you might look a little less tired,” I said. “It’s been a long time since you’ve looked so openly exhausted. You remind me of the Zent when I saw him at the Dedication Ritual. Just what kind of life have you been leading in Ahrensbach?”

Wilfried examined Ferdinand, looking dubious, then shook his head. “He doesn’t seem much different from usual to me... I’m impressed you could tell, Rozemyne.”

“It’s understandable that you couldn’t. You never had many opportunities to see him, after all.”

Pretty much all nobles hid their emotions, but Ferdinand was an expert after so many long years of dealing with Veronica. That was why only someone very close to him would see through his facade.

Ferdinand grimaced—probably uncomfortable that Wilfried was still staring at his face—and extended a hand to me. “Rozemyne, you don’t look very well yourself. You did not get any rest between the Interduchy Tournament and the awards ceremony, did you? You have been pushing yourself much too hard.”

After squeezing my cheeks, Ferdinand inspected my health as he had always used to. He checked my forehead, wrists, temperature, pulse, and so on. I closed my eyes; feeling his touch was actually kind of nostalgic.

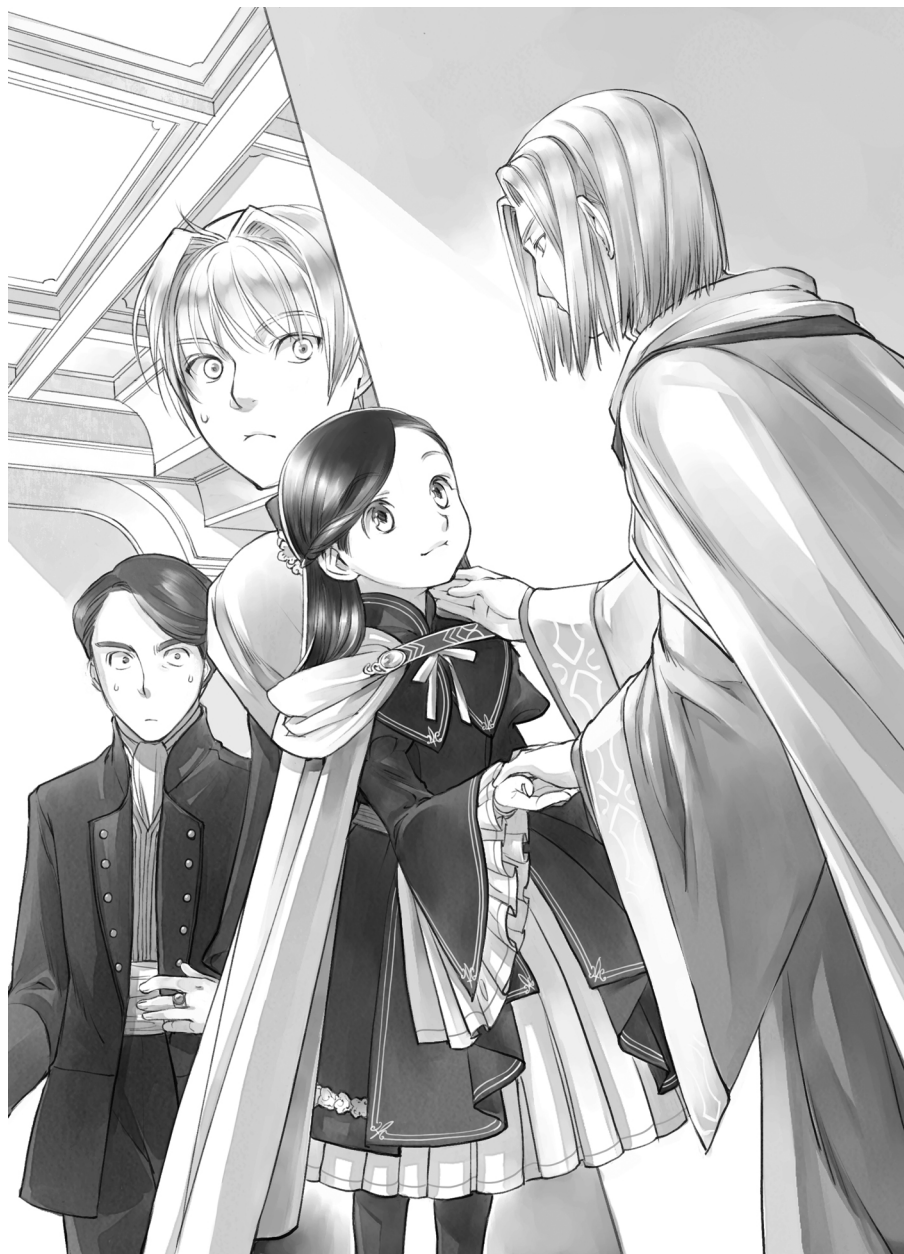
“I’m really healthy now thanks to you,” I said. “I didn’t collapse at all today, and I’ve barely ended up bedridden as of late. Even when I do catch a fever, I usually recover after a couple of days.”

“Even so, your temperature seems a bit high. Have you not had any potions since returning from the Interduchy Tournament? As you are now, you will surely feel the repercussions tomorrow.” His chilly hand on my nape actually felt pretty nice, so he was right—I was probably coming down with a bit of a fever.

“I drank one made with kindness, so I think I’m fine, but...”

“Good, then.” After performing his last few checks, Ferdinand removed his hands. “Exercise regularly to increase your strength. You are still relying on supporting magic tools, no?”

“I will do my best,” I replied. But when I finally opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Wilfried staring at me.



“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, I’m just a little surprised.”

Surprised about what? I wondered—but then I saw that he was still pushing against the mattress. No doubt he was captivated by the glory of coil technology.

“Benches like that can’t be mass-produced,” I said, “and there is much room for improvement. They still feel amazing, though, don’t they?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah...” Wilfried replied. He put on a smile, then glanced between Ferdinand and me while continuing to test the mattress.

“What?”

“No, it’s nothing. Really. Oswald, could you start preparing dinner?”

Oswald got straight to work, but he seemed very conscious of us for some reason. A large preservation magic tool was brought in from the Ehrenfest Dormitory. It contained today’s dinner, as well as several meals for Ferdinand to take back to Ahrensbach.

Incidentally, we had borrowed the magic tool from Elvira. She had immediately accepted my request to provide Ferdinand with delicious food and sent the tool to the temple by carriage.

“Justus, it will take some time to inspect the food in the tool,” I said. “You may do that while we are eating.”

“Thank you, milady,” he replied. “We treasure Ehrenfest meals, as we can use them when Lord Ferdinand does not have much of an appetite. I did not expect our stock to be replenished during our visit, so I am very much grateful.”

In other words, Ferdinand was swamped with work. I glared at him, but he dismissed my concerns right away, saying he had no choice.

“Sergius, I will entrust you with serving me,” Ferdinand said.

“Understood, Lord Ferdinand.”

And so, we started our meal. Today’s food was intended to please Ferdinand above all else, so his favorite dishes were being served. Of course, making double consommé was too time-consuming of a request for the extremely busy chefs of the castle or the dormitory, especially around the time of the Interduchy Tournament. For that reason, we had gotten his temple chefs to make it and then transported it here in Elvira’s magic tool.

“Huh? Is this meat from a tauchen?” Wilfried asked, his eyes widening.

Tauchen meat was pretty rare, so it was never used for dormitory meals. We weren’t eating the same food as those in the dining room,

however. Our dinner had been specially prepared in the temple, using tons of rarer and more expensive ingredients. I discreetly asked Wilfried to keep that a secret from the others.

“Ferdinand enjoys consommé and tauchen cooked in pome,” I explained, “so the temple chefs made all this specially. His personal chefs from his days as the High Priest made sure everything is exactly as he likes it, and they followed Hartmut’s instructions brilliantly. Ferdinand, it must take you back being able to have your favorite food prepared by your old cooks.”

“I suppose... Tell them I am highly satisfied,” Ferdinand replied, looking serene as he tasted the tauchen. It was clear that he was genuinely enjoying his food.

As we ate, we discussed the Interduchy Tournament and the guests from other duchies whom Wilfried had spoken with.

“Our joint research with Dunkelfelger sure drew a lot of attention,” I remarked. “Tons of duchies were asking us to collaborate with them next year. Of course, I turned away all the ones I could safely reject.”

“Oho...” Ferdinand said, impressed. “Ehrenfest truly has climbed the rankings compared to when I attended the Royal Academy.”

Wilfried gave a half-smile. “Father asked for Ehrenfest’s ranking to stay the same. He said that if our duchy climbs any higher, we won’t be able to keep up.”

“You went too far again, hm?” Ferdinand asked, fixing me with a stern look.

I went ahead and said, “Yep.” I certainly had overstepped in places. “But our rank won’t increase again this year. Instead, in recognition of our accomplishments, Ehrenfest is going to receive the same treatment as the duchies that won the civil war. I *might* have acted out of anger, since everyone kept insulting Sylvester...”

“I understand the desire to commit small acts of vengeance, but your whims always end up escalating out of control. I recall saying that you should *always* report and discuss matters before taking action, but it seems you did no such things. Am I wrong?”

I could only hang my head. This lecture was probably a good opportunity for Ferdinand to blow off some steam, so I didn’t want to stop him, but I wished that it could have waited until after dinner.

“Uncle, even after you told Rozemyne not to get involved with the royal family, she interacted with them again and again,” Wilfried said. “You really need to scold her.”

Ferdinand glared at him. “You should have done a much better job of containing her. She does not learn unless she is scolded while in the act or appropriately set on the right path. Furthermore, Sylvester *just* told me not to lecture her too much.”

Come again...?

I was genuinely shocked to hear Ferdinand say that, especially when he looked completely serious. “Have you *really* been listening to Sylvester’s advice? I mean, not *once* have you praised me so far. And what was all that chiding about?”

“Those were simple warnings,” Ferdinand replied with a very nice smile. “If my intention were to scold you, I would not be acting so kind. Right now, I could easily scold both you and Wilfried until the last light of this world fades away. Instead, I am containing myself as much as possible. Or would you rather I give you a taste of *real* scolding?”

Wilfried and I desperately shook our heads. If this was his idea of containing himself, I didn’t even want to think about him going all out.

By the time we finished eating and started drinking tea, Justus had traded places with Sergius, having apparently finished going through the food in the magic tool. Our retainers were similarly returning from dinner. In their place, Rihyarda, Oswald, and those from the Knight’s Order stepped down to eat.

“All that aside, how was this year’s winter hunt?” Ferdinand asked. “Did it end without incident?”

“Well, it ended,” I said, aware that he was actually referring to the purge. “We were here in the Royal Academy, so we do not know the details. You may wish to ask Sylvester about it later.”

Wilfried gave me a harsh frown. “Rozemyne, Uncle has moved to another duchy. You shouldn’t talk about Ehrenfest’s internal affairs so lightly.”

Perhaps not, but Ferdinand had gone to Ahrensbach to obtain intelligence about Georgine and protect Ehrenfest from a distance. He would be in trouble if we didn’t share at least some of our own intelligence with him in turn.

“Wilfried, Ferdinand is—”

“Stop, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. He looked at the attendant side of the screen, where Sergius currently was. “Wilfried is correct—you should think very carefully about all that you tell me. Things are no longer as they once were.”

“That’s true, but sharing intelligence is still important,” I said, frowning. I was afraid of Ferdinand being isolated in Ahrensbach.

He shrugged. “I will speak to Sylvester about Ehrenfest. As for you... Yes, let us discuss that shumil stuffed animal. To whom did you intend to gift it? I will need to compensate you.”

“As I said, there is no need for you to apologize...”

“Lady Rozemyne,” Lieseleta said, stopping me in my tracks. She

asked for permission to speak, then whispered, "May I suggest accepting his apology? Lord Ferdinand will feel more relieved to have compensated you, which may be what you wish for in the first place."

I didn't want to go along with this, since Detlinde was the one to blame... but if complying would make Ferdinand feel better, so be it.

"But what kind of compensation can he give...?" I asked.

"Perhaps he could make a new stuffed animal for you," Lieseleta said. "That would certainly do. He could even fill it with messages of his own. Would you not appreciate that?"

Before I even had a chance to respond, she spread out a cloth. There was a teleportation circle on it, from which appeared a pot and a steady stream of ingredients. As it turned out, she had placed the connecting circle in the brewing room and prepared everything well in advance. Our corner of the tea room began to look more and more like a brewing space.

"Naturally, we cannot prepare a brewing stand," Lieseleta noted, "so please use this table. Lord Ferdinand, if you would start making a sound-recording tool for Lady Rozemyne..."

Ferdinand, who had been watching the teleportation circle in a daze, smirked upon hearing the request. "Making a new one would certainly be ideal compensation. I do not have much time, though. Rozemyne, can I rely on your assistance?"

"My experience is yours," I replied. "You can count on me."

Ferdinand wasted no time before picking up the ingredients we needed. His face, which had been so sullen and exhausted a moment ago, was now livelier than ever. The whole "compensation" thing was merely a front; he was simply excited to be brewing again.

I turned to Lieseleta and gave her a big smile.

Ferdinand then turned to Wilfried and the apprentice scholars. "You will assist us too. Apprentice scholars should be capable of preparing for a brewing session."

From there, Ferdinand started drawing schematics on the table; he had memorized the production process detailed in Raimund's reports. In the meantime, the apprentice scholars used waschen to clean the brewing tools.

"Now then," Ferdinand said, "I have been tasked with making a stuffed animal for Rozemyne, but how many more will we produce? I imagine your intended recipient will need one too."

I pondered the question. "My original intention was to give the stuffed animal to Lady Letizia. It was going to speak words of encouragement, since you are always so harsh, and repeat a warning that you should not scold her any further."

"Right. That really does sound important," Wilfried added, a distant look in his eye as he helped the scholars wash the brewing

tools. “You’re demanding beyond measure, Uncle—I remember thinking as much when you were teaching Rozemyne and me. You have high standards and a merciless attitude...”

As it turned out, Wilfried had been given an endless stream of tasks during my two-year slumber.

“I’m glad you agree,” I said. “For anyone studying under Ferdinand to survive, praise is absolutely necessary.”

I went on to list all the phrases I was planning to add to the magic tool. Ferdinand maintained a grimace the entire time, while Justus chuckled and said, “Her letter, I assume.” Evidently, he knew what Letizia had written.

“It may be wise to register the new magic tool with Sergius’s mana, assuming he is close with Lady Letizia’s head attendant,” I said. “Lady Letizia has left her family to be adopted, has she not? If possible, I would like her parents in Drewanchel to record the messages. I am sure their voices will encourage her more than anything else.”

“I see...” Ferdinand muttered. “In that case, you will want four stuffed animals in total: one with her parents’ voices, one with your voice, the one that I owe you, and one to keep in reserve. Apprentices, measure the ingredients accordingly.”

They nodded and got straight to work.

Once the ingredients had been measured, Ferdinand and I cut them into more manageable pieces and separated the elements within them, among other things.

“Ngh... They prepare ingredients so much faster than I do...”

“Yeah. And we’ve never needed to be this precise for a brew before. Considering the quality of the ingredients, this is so far beyond what we’re used to.”

Hartmut had done a good job of keeping up when being taught to make rejuvenation potions, but Philine and Roderick weren’t being much help at all. The same went for Ignaz and the other apprentice archscholars. They were all merely watching in shock, probably because this was their first time seeing Ferdinand brew.

“Hold on... Are we making them all at once?”

“Indeed,” I said. “Brewing in bulk is quite common and much quicker than brewing over a longer period. It also helps us to ensure that our ingredients are all of uniform quality.” I gave Ferdinand some of the ingredients he had entrusted me with. “Finished.”

Justus smiled at Ignaz’s group while also handing Ferdinand some ingredients. “It all comes down to experience. You just haven’t done enough brewing in your lives.”

“Also keep in mind that I have a lot more experience than most other students, since I need to make my own rejuvenation potions,” I

added. Those potions, coupled with all that jureve business, meant that I was better accustomed to brewing than the apprentice scholars in my year. Not to mention, I'd started out being taught by *Ferdinand*. His teachings were logical and efficient, sure, but his demands and expectations had been entirely unreasonable.

"Ferdinand uses a far more efficient brewing style than what we're taught in class," I continued. "Even just watching him should be a very enriching experience."

I must have convinced them, as they all started paying very close attention. Meanwhile, Ferdinand morphed his schtappe, then immediately used a time-saving magic circle.

Mm... I'm still not good enough to use those off the bat.

Ingredients were usually added at certain times and in a particular sequence, so observing any changes in your brew was crucial. The problem with using a time-saving magic circle was that those changes would happen in an instant—one moment you would be watching the pot, waiting for the right cue, the next you would have missed it completely. This drastically increased the chance of you messing up your brew, which was why I only used time-saving circles once the ingredients had all been added and the only thing left to do was stir.

I've still got a long way to go if I want to catch up to Ferdinand.

Once all of the ingredients were in the concoction and we only needed to stir, Ferdinand told Justus to add *another* time-saving magic circle. The apprentice scholars clamored in shock... but Justus merely said, "Understood" and started carrying out his order, drawing the circle atop the brewing pot.

Using a time-saving magic circle at this stage of the brewing process caused your mana to be sucked out all at once instead of being drawn out slowly, which made things a lot harder to control. This was my first time seeing it stacked on top of another time-saving circle, so I was excited to see what would change—but then Ferdinand glanced at me.

"Rozemyne. Draw one of your own when Justus is done."

"We're *triple*-stacking it?" I asked, dumbstruck. "Is that even safe?"

"As I said, we do not have much time. Do you consider me incompetent?"

"No."

Ferdinand *never* fought a battle he couldn't win, so I trusted that he'd pull this off without issue—but that didn't stop me from being surprised. I wasn't alone either; the apprentice scholars were just as thoroughly stunned. In fact, the only one of us who looked completely unfazed was Wilfried; he had grown accustomed to seeing Ferdinand pull insane brewing maneuvers back when he tutored us for the archduke candidate course.

“There,” Justus said, moving over. “All yours, milady.”

We traded places—with the apprentice scholars still watching in a daze—then I started drawing a time-saving magic circle with my schtappe. Ferdinand was watching the brewing pot like a hawk, and for good reason—as soon as my magic circle was complete, he would need to pour mana into it *and* the other two circles.

Of course, Ferdinand didn’t miss a beat; he tightened his grip on the stirring stick the instant my circle was done. The triple-layering meant he would need to expend a ton of mana in an extremely short period, but the defiant smile on his face as he watched the pot made it clear that he welcomed the challenge.

“Done.”

After one bell, Ferdinand announced the completion of his fourth brew—three more than any normal person would have managed under the same time constraints. He had a very pleased look on his face as he removed the completed sound-recording magic tools from the pot; it was good to see him so satisfied.

“Attendants, clean up,” Ferdinand said. “We cannot simply leave these brewing tools here.”

Lieseleta started putting the waschen-cleaned implements onto a teleportation circle. “The other circle is in the brewing room,” she said. “Would someone go to receive the items on that end?”

The apprentice scholars had been watching the attendants in a daze, but they came back to their senses when they heard Lieseleta’s request. Some left for the brewing room, while the others said, “Allow us to put away the implements.”

“Understood,” Lieseleta replied. “I entrust the rest to you.”

Right away, the apprentice scholars started putting the brewing implements and leftover ingredients on the teleportation circle. Each time the circle flashed, the items atop it disappeared. It was pretty fun to watch.

Ferdinand examined the scholars for a moment, then took a seat at the cleared table and exhaled slowly. Sergius poured him some tea, having finished eating dinner while we were brewing.

Wilfried and I also sat down at the table, whereupon we had our attendants pour us some tea. “I never would have thought it possible to make four magic tools in one bell,” I said, looking at the sound-recorders on the table. Then, I turned to Ferdinand and smiled. “Now, with the tools made, I will need to charge you four times for the use of my schematics.”

“I did not use your schematics,” he retorted. “I already have them memorized.”

“But I purchased them, and Raimund needs funding to continue

his work as a researcher.” I didn’t have a personal interest in the money—the magic tools were what mattered to me—but I needed Raimund to understand the wonders of getting paid for his research. Spreading the concept of intellectual property was equally as important... but when I explained the idea and my intended introduction of royalties to Ferdinand, he shook his head.

“Your thoughts are always incomprehensible.”

Then, he instructed Justus to pay me.

“The Printing and Smithing Guilds have done a good job of enforcing them so far,” I said, “but for magic tools, we are going to need a much stronger organization.”

“I would suggest you wait until purchasing manuscripts and distributing royalties for book sales become more commonplace. Having a successful precedent will make it easier for you to convince the nobility. I understand that doing everything at once is a bad habit of yours, but you must exercise better self-control. For now, spread the concept among any researchers you purchase schematics from by offering them patent fees, and make it clear that book royalties are *always* paid when they are due.”

Some good, honest work should definitely help...

Once all the cleaning was done, the apprentice scholars who had gone to the brewing room returned. They were chattering about the “amazing brewing” they had seen and saying that they couldn’t wait to try it out themselves. Some even began to question Ferdinand about the process. He answered with a smile, but he seemed a little tired to me; it was like his rush of satisfaction had started to wane, and in its place had come a ruthless wave of exhaustion.

“You have a discussion with Sylvester after this, don’t you?” I asked. “Do you need healing?”

Ferdinand paused, then said, “It would be appreciated.”

I gazed around the tea party room. Justus and Eckhart looked exhausted too. Sergius and the retainers who had assisted us didn’t seem quite as bad, but I could tell they were tired all the same.

I stood up, produced my schtappe, and chanted, “*Streitkolben*” to produce Flutrane’s staff. Then, I healed all those present in one fell swoop.

“What in the...?” Ferdinand muttered, his brow furrowed. Despite my efforts to make him feel better, he was pinching the bridge of his nose as if he had suddenly developed a headache.

“Hm? Did it not work?” I asked.

“You have grown beyond my wildest expectations. How have you made this much progress in just one season...?”

“Wha? *Wha?*”

I’d simply done what came naturally to me—was that really so

distressing? But in the face of my confusion, Ferdinand tapped the table and told me to sit back down. I could feel a lecture coming.

I disappeared Flutrane's staff and resumed my seat, though I made sure to scoot my chair away from Ferdinand in the process.

"Now, Rozemyne," he began, "why did you go out of your way to produce Flutrane's staff?"

"Using my ring would have required me to heal everyone individually, no? But by using Flutrane's staff, I was able to heal everyone at once. It was very useful during the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual."

Ferdinand merely heaved a heavy sigh.

Wilfried shot me a look. "Rozemyne, you shouldn't—"

"This is not an internal affair that needs to be kept secret," I said with a smile. "Everyone who participated in the Dedication Ritual is familiar with the process."

"That's true, but... listening to you speak is nerve-racking. I can never predict what you might say next."

Putting his concerns aside, I told Ferdinand everything that was already common knowledge while avoiding anything that might get me lectured. "I am maturing even in your absence, Ferdinand. I've learned to make two divine instruments at once with my schtappe."

"So that was not an error or my own misinterpretation..." Ferdinand said. I'd already mentioned my newfound ability in a letter to him, but I'd evidently used too many noble euphemisms in my attempt to get the letter past inspections.

"It's no different from how knights make swords and shields at the same time. Even the royal family agreed. It won't be long now before I can follow your example and make *several* shields at once, so look forward to that."

In response to my hopes and dreams, Ferdinand squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to endure a sudden sharp pain. "That was a terrible comparison."

"How so?"

"No, never mind. There is no reason for me to say anything else," Ferdinand replied, waving me away. "I am a citizen of Ahrensbach now, and this is an Ehrenfest problem." His dismissive remark elicited a look of surprise from Wilfried.

"Speaking of which," I said, "we distributed the mana-recovering rejuvenation potions you taught me to make. They are tremendously valuable, it seems. Even the royal family was shocked by their efficacy."

"How is this relevant?" Ferdinand asked, looking like he no longer had the energy to continue our conversation.

"You could use them to make a great contribution to the country

or perhaps calm the waters on Lady Detlinde's mishap. Regardless, they would be useful to keep in your back pocket."

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes a little. "Rozemyne, do you expect her to do something? Tell me, if you think I can stop her in time."

"Wilfried, the hairpins and the light show aren't secrets, right?"

"Hm... No, I don't think so."

So, I explained the situation: that Detlinde likely intended to outshine the royal family with her hairpins, then perform a dedication whirl while covered in sparkling feystones.

"Such a slight against the royal family cannot be overlooked," Ferdinand said. "I will do my best to take the hairpins from her. But... what brought about this idea for a 'light show'?"

"It all started after the divine protections ritual," Wilfried replied. "Rozemyne couldn't control her mana during dedication whirl practice and ended up making the feystones she was wearing shine."

"But I did not release a single blessing!" I interjected. "My feystones shone, but I didn't. That's deserving of praise, isn't it?"

Ferdinand shot me a curt glance before ignoring me entirely.

Meanwhile, Wilfried shook his head. "I don't know what makes you think that. It was because you stood out so much that Detlinde came to us during our tea party and said that she intends to repeat your spectacle for her coming-of-age ceremony."

"Rozemyne..." Ferdinand said. "You truly are..."

"I-It wasn't my fault! The incident during practice was unavoidable! *And*, I think you're forgetting the role *you* played in all this, Wilfried. You told her she could shine more easily if she used feystones of a lower quality." If she had followed that advice and was practicing with more suitable feystones, then surely the blame rested squarely on his shoulders.

Upon hearing my revelation, Ferdinand glared at Wilfried. "You seem to have done something very unnecessary." It was time for a *very* long scolding.

"Lady Rozemyne," Brunhilde whispered while tapping me on the shoulder, "seventh bell is about to ring. If you intend to entrust Lord Sergius with your magic tool for Lady Letizia, might I suggest doing so soon? I am concerned that it may have already been forgotten."

This also seemed like a good opportunity to stop Ferdinand from lecturing Wilfried, so I tugged on his sleeve and said, "If we give Sergius one of the magic tools we made, would he be able to fill it with messages of praise from Lady Letizia's family?" I wasn't able to ask Sergius directly because he wasn't my retainer.

To answer my question, Ferdinand had to stop lecturing Wilfried. "Well, Sergius? Do you have a means of making contact with Lady Letizia's parents?"

"I do," he replied. "I was raised in Drewanchel." He had moved to Ahrensbach with his parents when Letizia was adopted, but he still had many associates in his home duchy.

"Then we can register this magic tool with Sergius's mana," I said. "May I include some encouraging words of my own?"

"Of course," Sergius replied, his yellow-green eyes creased in a kind smile. "I am sure that Lady Letizia will appreciate your heartfelt concern."

I gave one of the magic tools to Ferdinand, who then passed it along to Sergius and taught him how to use it. Then, I recorded three messages: "You are working so hard and so well, Lady Letizia," "Do not be too harsh, Ferdinand," and "Ferdinand, make sure to praise Lady Letizia at times and tell her she is doing very well."

"What do you think you're doing?" Ferdinand demanded with a glare.

"You *must* praise Lady Letizia whenever she brings out this magic tool. And do not resort to the same monotone voice you used with me," I shot back without the slightest hesitation, then handed the tool to Sergius. "There isn't enough time for us to make the stuffed toy ourselves, so please task Lady Letizia's attendants with finishing the rest."

"Sergius, could you send an ordonnanz to Drewanchel, by chance?" Ferdinand asked. "It would be ideal if we could do the recording tomorrow."

"Understood. If you will excuse me for a moment..." Sergius said, then disappeared behind the screen for attendants.

Ferdinand looked at the three remaining magic tools and grimaced. "So, what am I expected to record for you?"

"Words of praise, of course!" I would then have the tool put inside a red panda plushie, I thought—but before I could get carried away with my excitement, Lieseleta made a very harsh observation.

"Lord Ferdinand, if I may... While I agree that a few words of praise are warranted, I believe Lady Rozemyne would benefit from the same kind of messages she gave you."

"There should be instructions for her to stop reading and to rest more," Brunhilde added, nodding along. And my retainers weren't the only ones—Wilfried chimed in that the tool should include some reproofs as well.

"I certainly would not mind including a scolding or two," Ferdinand said.

"Hold on," I interjected. "I said I wanted praise."

"Irrelevant. Now, on a more important note, what messages do you intend to leave me?"

"Lady Rozemyne prepared this as a gift for you," Lieseleta replied

on my behalf, taking out a dark-blue shumil and setting it in front of me. She must have gone to my chambers to retrieve it. The care and consideration my attendants showed me was almost painful at times.

“No, no, Lieseleta. I intend to give this to *Justus*. Ferdinand would just stick it in a box, never to see the light of day again.” I picked the shumil up off the table and pushed it into Justus’s hands. “Use this when Ferdinand is too absorbed in his work to listen to reason.”

“Should we see what messages you recorded for him?”

“NO!” I cried, feeling the blood drain from my face. “Later, Justus! Check later!”

Ferdinand scoffed. “We will do no such thing. The last thing we want is a repeat of that incident during today’s demonstrations.”

“Ferdinand, look! That box over there is full of research documents about Schwartz and Weiss! How about we start looking through them? Sounds good, right?!”

“That can come later. Justus, the recordings.”

At once, Justus obeyed the order from his lord. My messages to Ferdinand started playing one after another.

“Ferdinand, are you getting enough rest? Don’t work yourself too hard.”

“No matter how busy things get, remember that you need to eat. Don’t try to get all of your energy from potions; have proper food too.”

“If you run out of Ehrenfest meals, send word right away.”

That was as far as we got before Ferdinand pinched my cheek.

“Ow, it hurts!”

“Justus, that is enough,” Ferdinand said. “I get the idea, so you can hand me the tool now.” He reached toward Justus with a very pretty—and very fake—smile on his face. Without a doubt, he intended to seal that shumil away for good.

“No, Justus! Don’t! If you’re going to give it to him, I’d rather you just give it back instead!”

“What’s all this fuss about?” Sylvester asked, exasperated, as he entered the room with his guards and other retainers. Their sudden arrival made the tea party room feel so much smaller.

“Ah! Sylvester!” I cried. “I made a magic tool for Justus to use, but Ferdinand is trying to steal it away!”

“Is this it here? What did you record for him?” Sylvester snatched the plushie from Justus and touched its feystone. Then, after listening to the messages, he burst into laughter and tossed it back to Justus. “Keep this with you. If you want Ferdinand to obey, all you need to do is threaten to share these recordings with other people in Ahrensbach.”

“Understood, Aub Ehrenfest,” Justus replied with an amused

smile. He then put the dark-blue shumil with the rest of the retainers' luggage.

"Anyway, time for the adults to talk," Sylvester said, shooin Wilfried and me away. "Back to your rooms, you two." I noticed that he had some wine with him. The table was immediately cleared of dishes, and some glasses were prepared in their place.

We said good night, then left the tea party room.

In the end, I never got Ferdinand to praise me... Boohooohoo.

Farewells and the Coming-of-Age Ceremony

The next day of the Interduchy Tournament was the coming-of-age and graduation ceremonies. Gretia came to wake me a little before second bell.

“Lady Rozemyne, it is time to get up.”

“Gretia?” I asked, rolling over to look at her. “You rarely come to wake me up in the morning. Is Rihyarda busy?”

“I realize it is still quite early, but the aub has sent word for you to have breakfast with Lord Ferdinand. Rihyarda is preparing everything in the tea party room.”

I leapt out of bed. I’d previously been told that I couldn’t have breakfast with Ferdinand, since it would take too long to clean up the tea party room afterward.

“Even after sharing drinks with the aub and speaking with him about a variety of topics, Lord Ferdinand decided to delve into some research documents. You have been asked to wake him up.”

As it turned out, Sylvester had ordered me to get up early so that I could see Ferdinand off. Having three archduke candidates’ worth of retainers would also make the cleanup that much faster.

Woo-hoo! Thank you, Sylvester!

Gretia and Brunhilde quickly helped me to change my clothes. Lieseleta and Leonore weren’t here at the moment, since they had already headed off to eat breakfast. As graduating students, they needed to eat and wash before their parents arrived.

“Graduating students sure do have a lot to prepare for,” I said with a giggle, remembering how Angelica had done pretty much nothing for her own graduation, forcing Lieseleta and their parents to do everything for her. Then, I took out my ordonnanz feystone. “Good morning, Ferdinand. I am awake and about to make my way to the tea party room for breakfast.”

Upon exiting my room, I found Charlotte waiting outside, also ready to leave. We went downstairs together and met up with Wilfried, then the three of us headed to the tea party room. The attendants greeted us when we arrived.

A quick look around the room was enough to see that the space for retainers was gone, and the bench had been moved to welcome the graduating students. The retainers’ luggage was nowhere to be seen,

so it had probably been moved to the area where Ferdinand was staying.

"I see you have almost finished cleaning up," I said.

"Indeed," Rihyarda replied. "Breakfast is over here. Come now, my boy, miladies. The rest of you, go eat in the dining hall." She sent our underage retainers away while guiding us three archduke candidates to the table.

Ferdinand must have heard our arrival, as he came out from behind his screen. He was dressed, but he definitely hadn't gotten enough sleep.

"Good morning, Lord Ferdinand."

"Yes, good morning."

"You still sound half asleep. Were you up too late reading those research documents?" It was exceedingly rare to see him so dazed; he looked just as exhausted as when he had visited the Royal Academy two years ago and stayed up all night with Hirschur.

"That was a contributing factor, but not the largest one. This bench was more comfortable to sleep on than I expected."

"Then it was well worth bringing. Shall we have it transported to Ahrensbach when you send for the rest of your luggage?" His move had come so abruptly that he only had the bare necessities, and this would continue to be the case until his wedding to Detlinde. The goods for spring and the gifts from other nobles that had gathered over winter were still sitting in Ehrenfest.

"No need," Ferdinand replied. "I am still in a guest room."

"I mean when spring comes and your Starbind Ceremony has concluded."

He paused for a moment and then said, "I will consider your offer after I obtain my own chambers." It was an unusually half-baked answer from someone who usually thought so far ahead, but I could see why he wouldn't want the furniture when he had nowhere to put it. I told him to let me know when he needed it.

Ferdinand nodded, took a seat, and then gestured me over. "Come here, Rozemyne. Has your fever gone down?"

"It feels like it," I said, obediently standing in front of him. He started checking my temperature and pulse, at which point Charlotte spoke out in surprise.

"Sister, were you unwell...?"

"I was a little exhausted after the tournament, that's all. But I took my medicine, and my fever was gone by the time I woke up this morning."

"Be silent, Rozemyne, and close your mouth," Ferdinand said. "You are making it hard to measure your pulse."

"Sorry."

In the end, my standard checkup came back mostly clear; my fever had gone down, but I needed to avoid overexerting myself. I sat back down.

“Rozemyne no longer collapses as often as she used to,” Charlotte said. “I did not think she would end up falling ill.”

“I assumed it happened because I was so moved to be attending my first awards ceremony,” I replied while beginning to eat breakfast. “How was dinner last night, Charlotte? We didn’t have a chance to ask Sylvester, since he sent us away the moment he returned.”

Charlotte explained that it had been very enjoyable. Apparently, the students were all very excited about how many honor students Ehrenfest had produced.

“Incidentally, Ferdinand... what did you and Sylvester discuss after we went to bed?” I asked. “It was your first time sharing a drink in quite a while, so you must have had a lot to catch up on, right?”

He cast his eyes down, then said only one thing: “Go ask Sylvester.”

After breakfast, our plates and such were cleared away, and Justus placed three things on the table: a bag and two sound-recording magic tools.

“This is for you,” Ferdinand said, sliding one of the tools over to me. “As per your attendants’ wishes, I have included many words of warnings.”

“Did you honor my request?”

“Who can say?”

“So mean...”

I puffed out my cheeks, then activated the magic tool. Just as Ferdinand had said, the first message was admonishing: “It is time to eat. I do not know what you are doing but stop at once.”

I wonder what the others say...

“That is enough, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said with a grimace. “If you wish to listen to the rest, wait until you are back in your room. I do not much care for listening to my own voice.”

I elected to heed his warning; something told me he would confiscate the tool from me if I refused. He then gave me the bag, which was made of special leather that didn’t conduct mana. Inside were another magic tool and some paper.

“Last night, you registered one of the magic tools to Sergius and added some messages to it, correct?” Ferdinand asked. “Since we were able to brew four in total, I thought we could put one of the others toward furthering our research. Use this magic tool according to the instructions and inform me of the results. You may send your update by letter.”

I nodded and accepted the leather bag. This was part of a joint research project, so refusing wasn't an option anyway.

"As for the last remaining tool, might I take that as a backup?" Ferdinand continued. "I am sure I could think of various uses for it before next winter."

I nodded. "You made and paid for it, Ferdinand. Use it as you wish."

As per Sylvester's orders, we had gotten Ferdinand out of bed and eaten breakfast with him. From here, he would need to change into his formal attire and go welcome Detlinde. We had completed our duties and there was nothing else for us to do here, so it was time for us to return to the common room.

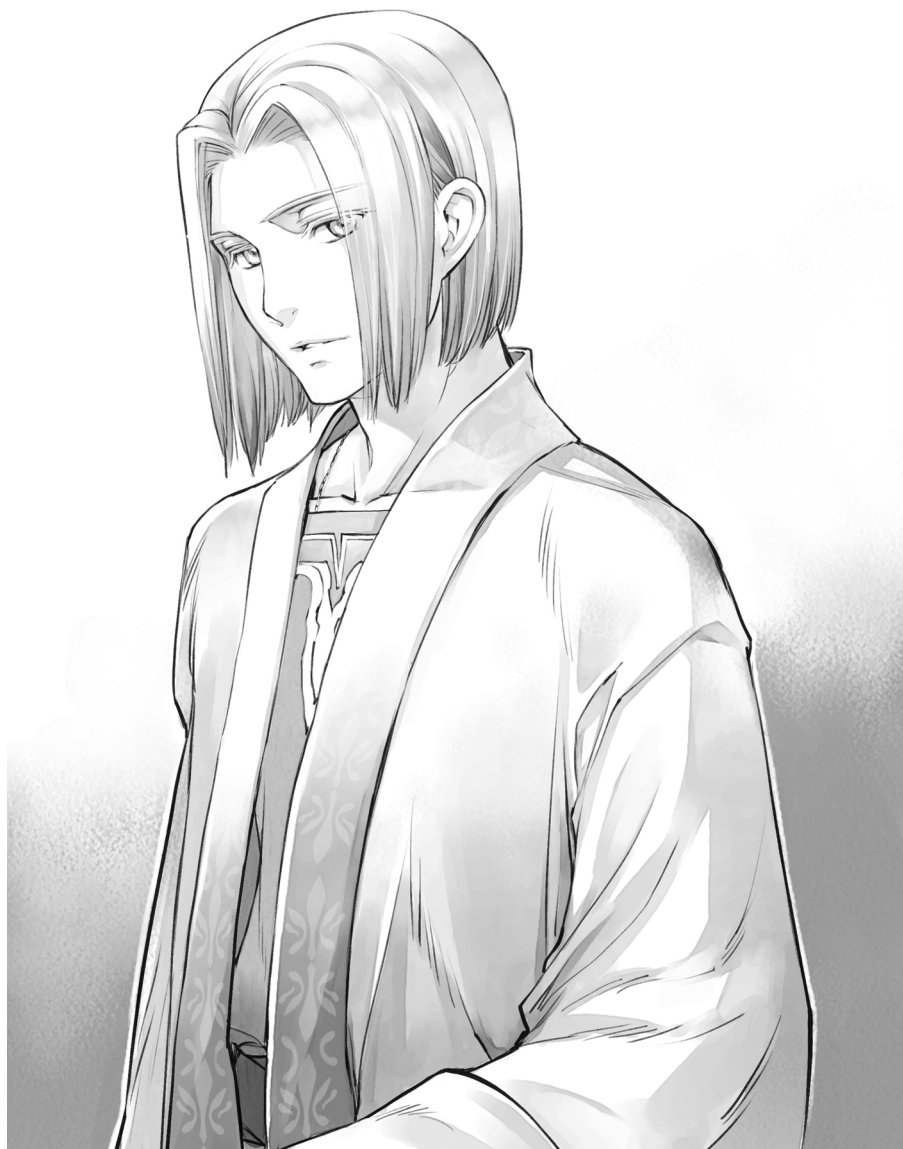
"Rozemyne, Rihyarda—Sylvester informed me that you both put a lot of effort into preparing this room for me," Ferdinand said.

"Because of you, I spent last night in great comfort. You have my utmost gratitude."

For him to be expressing his thanks like this, he really must have been comfortable. All of the thought Rihyarda and I had put into laying out the room had been recognized—and considering that I hadn't received *any* compliments last night, that made me doubly delighted. At the same time, however, my happiness was marred by sorrow. Ferdinand and I were going to have to say our farewells and separate once again.

"At times like this, a simple 'thank you' will suffice," I said, being snarky in an attempt to push my sadness from my thoughts. I expected Ferdinand to respond with his usual sardonic smirk... but instead, he gave me a kind smile, which I seldom ever saw from him.

"Thank you, Rozemyne, Rihyarda."



Those were his last words to us before he vanished behind the screen; he had no more time to spare. Hearing him speak so sincerely was so rare that I wasn't the only one trying not to cry.

"Now, let us head to the common room," Rihyarda said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Lord Ferdinand must change his clothes."

The entrance hall was filled with students preparing to go to the auditorium. I was going to join them, but Wilfried stopped me before I could.

"Wait in the common room like Rihyarda said," he told me. "You almost ended up sick yesterday. If you overdo it today, you'll end up having to leave midway through the ceremony again—and the last thing we want is for Uncle to worry about you."

I couldn't argue with that, so I returned to the common room with Judithe, leaving all of the preparations to everyone else for another year. Eventually, the graduating students' guardians began filtering in. Leonore's and Liesele's parents greeted me, then went to the rooms of their respective children.

After the last wave of guardians came the graduating students' escorts. Cornelius and Hartmut were among them, and they came to greet me dressed in formal attire.

"Cornelius," I said, "Leonore's parents arrived just a moment ago, so it may be some time before she is ready. Hartmut, I think you should go and welcome Clarissa as soon as you can; according to *Royal Academy Love Stories*, girls get very anxious while waiting."

Plus, considering her prior... *enthusiasm*... it was likely that she'd come to us if we kept her waiting too long. Making her uneasy was best avoided.

"Hartmut, did you obtain permission for your engagement?" I asked.

He nodded. "After considering the situation and all of the potential outcomes, they decided it would be safest for us to marry."

I'm not sure that's a good reason for two people to get married...

I was fine with it if everyone else was, but I couldn't help but wonder whether it really was for the best.

As I continued my discussion with Hartmut, a man came over to speak with me. "Lady Rozemyne, may I be permitted to greet you?" he asked.

As it turned out, the man was Thorsten, one of the adult scholars who served Wilfried in the castle. I'd already known about him, but this was my first time putting a face to the name. He was Liesele's partner, and given how calm and gentle he seemed, I was sure they would get along well.

"Do take good care of Lieseleta," I said.

"Understood."

The archducal couple arrived soon after Thorsten finished greeting me; Sylvester had returned to Ehrenfest to fetch Florencia. She looked much too pale to be described as healthy. Her loving husband was well aware of this, as he very carefully sat her down.

"I thank you ever so much, Sylvester."

"How are you doing?" I asked her.

"The teleportation circle seems to have left me quite dazed."

"That's why I asked you to stay in Ehrenfest and rest..." Sylvester said, but Florencia shook her head.

"This is the students' one and only graduation ceremony. I know this is selfish of me, but I wish to bless them on their special day." I could tell that they'd had this discussion plenty of times already, but the fact that Sylvester was still persisting showed just how much he loved his wife.

Rihyarda urged me along. "Let us go to the auditorium, milady. You will stand out if you do not arrive before the guardians start entering."

"Are the archducal lovebirds not coming too?" I asked.

"Florencia needs to rest for as long as she can," Sylvester said, shooing us out of the room. "Go away. You're a slow walker, so you'll need as much time as you can get."

And so, I made my way to the auditorium with Rihyarda and Judithe. Just like before, the walls had been taken down, making the room seem more like a coliseum with audience seating. At the center was a cylindrical white stage for the dedication whirl and sword dance, while farther beyond that was a shrine.

I was about to make my way to the guardians' seats, where I'd watched from last year, but Rihyarda stopped me in my tracks. "You are healthier now, milady," she said. "You may sit with the archducal family."

To my surprise, I was going to be sitting somewhere close to the stage, meaning I would have an excellent view of the dedication whirling. Charlotte beckoned me over, so I went and sat next to her.

"Sister, is Mother accompanying Father today?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Teleporting to the Royal Academy made her feel a little unwell, though, so she's going to rest in the dormitory for as long as she can before the ceremony."

"She's that sick?" Wilfried said. "I hope she feels better soon."

Sylvester had told me not to tell anyone that Florencia was almost certainly pregnant. Because there were so many aubs present for the Interduchy Tournament and its ceremonies, he had received a torrent of proposals for second wives. Thus, to minimize the number of

problems he had to deal with, he would only announce the good news after returning to Ehrenfest.

Ehrenfest's archducal couple arrived just before the graduating students. I wasn't sure how she was managing it—maybe she had taken a potion, maybe her rest had done her good, or maybe she was demonstrating her complete control over her emotions as a noble—but Florencia arrived at her seat wearing her usual smile.

"You shouldn't overdo it if you're not feeling well," I said to her in a low voice.

"Rozemyne, is that not a touch ironic coming from you?"

Florencia replied with a giggle just as the auditorium doors opened to reveal the graduating students. They entered and started making their way toward the stage—but someone among them was causing a stir in the audience.

Of course, the source of all the commotion was Detlinde. Her hair was styled in the shape of an awe-inspiring mountain, and she looked extremely proud of that fact. It was such a shocking sight that the entire audience ended up in a daze. And then there was Ferdinand. He was maintaining a professional smile as he walked beside his fiancée, but there was a hollow look in his eyes.

Aaaah! Ferdinand didn't manage to convince her!

Detlinde had evidently decided to wear... as much decoration as possible. Her hair was in a pouf of sorts that really reminded me of Marie Antoinette, and its brilliant blonde color made her look like a swaggering lighthouse. Poking out of the golden mountain were three reddish Ehrenfest hairpins, each decorated with lace and ribbons to make them stand out even more.

In a way, this is kind of amazing. I never thought I'd see someone with a hairstyle like this in Yurgenschmidt.

On closer inspection, Detlinde wasn't using *all* of the hairpins she had received from Ehrenfest; she had probably compromised and replaced some of them with other ornaments after being told time and time again that wearing too many flowery hairpins would offend the royal family.

To be fair, she does have fewer decorative flowers on her Ehrenfest hairpins so as not to outshine the royal family. I'm not sure that really matters when she's adorned them all with so much lace and so many ribbons, though... Plus, how is she going to dance with so much on her head...?

I instinctively turned my attention to where Ahrensbach's archducal family were seated. Georgine was watching with an impassive expression; had she failed to stop her daughter's madness too?

That must be it, right? No way would she just sit back and allow this

to happen. Except, well... that's exactly what she seems to be doing.

I was starting to feel very uneasy, but Detlinde looked more than satisfied about being the center of attention. Once the graduating students reached the stage, their nonstudent escorts made their way to their designated seating area. Ferdinand already looked exhausted.

From there, the Sovereign High Bishop performed the graduation ceremony, then the graduating students started offering music to the gods. I'd made my way here before getting a chance to see Ehrenfest's graduates in their formal attire, so I didn't know what Leonore or Lieseleta were wearing—and my eyes had been so drawn to Detlinde's insane hairdo that I was still none the wiser.

Now was my chance, though; Detlinde had moved from the stage for the music performances.

"Now, where's Lieseleta?" I wondered under my breath. "Even now, my attention keeps returning to Lady Detlinde..."

"I understand how you feel, Sister," Charlotte noted in an equally hushed voice. "I haven't been able to find my retainer either."

Even trying to skim the crowd was a challenge; Lieseleta was probably wearing something quite modest, and no matter how hard I tried, I found myself gawking at the blonde mountain poking out from among all the other heads. My retainer was bound to be among the singing students, so I focused my attention there instead.

"There," I said at last. "I can see Lieseleta."

She was wearing a light-cream outfit and a hairpin of the same color. Lieseleta tended to be more reserved and generally seemed to stay a little bit behind everyone else, which might have explained why she didn't always stand out despite being so beautiful, but today she looked extra pretty.

According to Muriella, she's quite popular with the boys of other duchies.

Well, that was Lieseleta found. I sighed in relief as the music performance ended, at which point those involved descended from and then encircled the stage. Knights dressed in blue took their place, ready to perform sword dances. There were twenty of them in total, all considered the best of the best, and Leonore was among them. I spotted her at once, since there were fewer female knights in the group.

Sitting in Leonore's violet hair were red and white flowers—a clear sign that she was born in the winter.

The knights readied their schtappe-made blades, and the music started right on cue. Each dancer moved perfectly in time with the rhythm, their movements a combination of powerful slashes and more feminine swings. Leonore in particular seemed so fluid and graceful, and she managed to exude an air of tenderness despite the dangerous

sword in her hand.



“Leonore really is so dazzling...” I said.

“Yeah, her dance isn’t bad—but she doesn’t beat Alexis,” Wilfried added, wearing a proud smile as he complimented his retainer. We debated whose performance was better, and soon enough, the sword dance came to an end.

“Next is the dedication whirl, huh...?” Sylvester muttered. “How on earth is she gonna whirl with that hairstyle?”

At that moment, I think he spoke for everyone present. We all watched with bated breath as Detlinde climbed onto the stage, dressed in a gaudy whirling outfit.

Detlinde's Dedication Whirl

Basking in all the attention from the audience, Detlinde, draped in the robes of the Goddess of Light, scooted toward Lestilaut, who was dressed as the God of Darkness. He looked at her with a grimace, having been burdened with the duty of escorting her onstage for the dedication whirl.

"Will you even be able to whirl while dressed so ornately?" Lestilaut asked, daring to broach the question that was on everyone's lips. I wanted to give him a standing ovation; as far as I was concerned, being able to say something so frank while in his position made him a genuine hero.

Unfortunately, the purpose of our hero's question did not reach Detlinde. "Yes, of course I can," she replied, very deliberately looking down at her hands. "I practiced diligently to make sure."

I think Lord Lestilaut was asking about your hair ornaments, so where are you looking? Is there something on your wrists? Feystones, maybe?

Indeed, it seemed that her ridiculous hairdo wasn't her only extravagance; she was wearing enough feystones to ensure heads would turn. I was openly shocked by how thoroughly she had prepared for today. How had she managed to get it all past Ferdinand, of all people?

As I contemplated my own question, the archduke candidates ascended the stage, their long sleeves swaying with each step. It was the God of Darkness's role to escort the Goddess of Light... but Lestilaut was doing his absolute best not to look at Detlinde at all. He wasn't even staring straight ahead; his head was tilted slightly away from her.

You're making the same face that Ferdinand was a moment ago! But do your best, Lord Lestilaut!

The archduke candidates took their respective positions, then knelt down and touched the stage. That movement alone was enough to make Detlinde's hair waver precariously, but she didn't seem to care. I was probably more worried about it collapsing than she was.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," Lestilaut began—and once again, a magic circle appeared atop the pure-white stage. No one else could see it, so I kept my mouth shut and just watched.

Music started to play, and the whirlers slowly rose to their feet.

Their long sleeves swayed as they gracefully raised their hands, and with that, it was time for the dedication whirl to begin.

Oh. She's actually trying to sparkle...

Immediately, the feystones dotting Detlinde's clothes started to glow. She had evidently hidden them all over her body. The feystones on her wrists and in her hair did the same—and as she was the only person covered in lights, she really did draw more attention to herself. As for the quality of her whirling, well... it could hardly be described as excellent. Her head moved as clumsily as one would expect, and the way her hair wobbled whenever she twirled was very distracting.

“Ooh, the Goddess of Light is shining...” Sylvester whispered. “Is this what Rozemyne's whirling was like?”

Charlotte gave a half-smile and shook her head. “The feystones Sister wore were of a much higher quality. She had the rainbow feystones on her hair stick coupled with her various charms, so her lights were far more dazzling than those tiny dots. Naturally, I was aware of the circumstances, so I was less absorbed in the beauty of the spectacle and more terrified of what blessings might leak out.”

A cold sweat ran down my back. At the time, I'd been so focused on keeping my mana in check that I hadn't even considered how I must have looked.

“Um, Charlotte... did I stand out more than Lady Detlinde does now?” I asked.

“You were shining so much that I stopped my own whirling without realizing it just to stare at you. I think that says it all,” Wilfried said, answering in her place.

NOOO! I stood out more than Lady Detlinde?! How much of an attention hog do people think I am?!

As I screamed on the inside, Detlinde's lights went out. She must have noticed because she furrowed her brow for a moment, and the glowing returned a few seconds later. Then it disappeared again. This process repeated several times.

No matter where I tried to focus, my eyes were inevitably drawn back to the flickering lights. Initially, I thought she was doing it on purpose to get even more attention... but on closer inspection, I noticed her grimace slightly each time her feystones lost their glow. This clearly wasn't what she wanted.

Then why is she making them flash...? Hm? Wait, is that mana?

I could see the faintly colored mana simmering around her—an obvious sign that she was expending far too much—and getting sucked into the magic circle. Was everyone seeing this, or was it only visible to those who could see the magic circle? Instinctively, I turned to Ferdinand. The fake smile had disappeared from his face, and he

was watching the stage with a very serious frown.

“Is it my imagination, or has Lady Detlinde begun to leak mana...?” Florencia murmured.

Charlotte shook her head. “I can see it too. I thought it was an illusion at first, but... does it not seem to be steadily growing thicker?”

Ah, so I *wasn't* the only one who could see the simmering mana. Everyone else must have noticed too because a stir ran through the audience, and some began to question just how much mana she was releasing.

“Er, Rozemyne... is that healthy?” Sylvester asked. “All that mana coming out of her, I mean.”

“You should know, Rozemyne,” Wilfried added. “In the past, you ended up like that all the time.”

Despite their expectations, I didn't have a clue. It was true that my mana sometimes leaked out when I was trying to hold it back or when I got too emotional, but I'd never deliberately channeled it into feystones positioned all over my clothes.

“Never before have I used my mana to make feystones all over my body shine, so I cannot speak to Lady Detlinde's precise condition. However, I *can* say that expending that much mana puts one's body under immense pressure—so much so that I always end up bedridden for days, even with potions.”

I was trying to be completely serious, but Sylvester just gave me a look of exasperation. “That doesn't tell us anything. You end up bedridden just trying to go outside.”

“Then I don't know.”

I thought back to all the students exhausted from the Dedication Ritual and the Haldenzel women who fell unconscious after the ritual for summoning spring forcibly sucked out their mana. Considering all that, my evaluation seemed pretty accurate—but I didn't know the details.

“Still,” I said, “Lady Detlinde is an archduke candidate set to become the next aub. She is presumably used to offering her mana, so this might not even register as an inconvenience. She should be fine.”

But no sooner had the words left my mouth than members of the audience started shouting out. Detlinde suddenly lurched forward, collapsing toward the God of Darkness who had been whirling beside her.

She isn't fine at all!

My breath caught in my throat as I watched the stage. It felt like everything was happening in slow motion—and at that moment, one of the red flowers securing Detlinde's hair fell out.

“What the...?!” shouted an audience member.

I wasn't sure of the reason for what happened next. It was possible

that Lestilaut had been too focused on his whirling to notice, or maybe he had still been trying to avoid looking at Detlinde. Perhaps his outstretched arm had simply obscured his view, putting her in a blind spot. At any rate, the outcome was the same: Lestilaut, a trained Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, was late in noticing the girl falling toward him.

“Wha—?” he exclaimed with wide eyes as his spinning body collided with something hard. He had slammed straight into Detlinde, causing her to lose her already shaky footing and topple backward. This time, she was heading straight for the archduke candidate playing the Goddess of Wind.

Detlinde’s remaining hair ornaments fell out, causing her already insecure hairdo to finally come apart. Audience members called out, trying to warn the girl dancing as the Goddess of Wind, but their cries didn’t reach her in time; while her sleeves dangled from her outstretched arms, she was knocked straight onto her rear.

The moment Detlinde landed facedown on the stage, the magic circle began to shine—but only for a brief moment before it returned to normal.

“Did anyone else see that magic circle on the stage?” someone asked.

It had shone for only a few seconds at most, but in those few seconds, it had evidently been burned into everyone’s memories. The audience buzzed with chatter about this unfamiliar occurrence.

“Why was a magic circle *there*, of all places?”

“What in the world *was* that...?”

As the voices became more numerous, I saw Ferdinand put a hand on his forehead. Our eyes met, and, after a contemplative look, he subtly pressed a finger against his lips.

So, basically... don’t say anything?

“Let there be silence!” shouted the Sovereign High Bishop. “The dedication whirl is not yet complete!”

“Religious ceremonies cannot be interrupted,” echoed the Sovereign High Priest, likewise trying to reclaim the attention of the noisy audience and the students now staring at the stage in bewilderment. Unfortunately for them, Detlinde was unconscious, and the girl performing as the Goddess of Wind was crushed beneath her; there was no way for the dance to continue.

“Lady Detlinde cannot be left in her current state,” Ferdinand informed the Ahrensbach nobles. “Let us go.” He stood up and climbed the steps up onto the stage, at which point the nobles snapped back to reality and mobilized as well.

“You,” Ferdinand continued, “take Lady Detlinde away and get her attendants to remove her whirling outfit. The rest of you, retrieve

her hair ornaments.”

Detlinde was picked up by one of her retainers and carried down from the stage, while the others did as instructed and retrieved the scattered ornaments. Ferdinand watched as his fiancée was taken off, then crouched down in front of the student playing the Goddess of Wind, who was still sitting on the ground, and sought her forgiveness.

“I sincerely apologize that Lady Detlinde’s passing out caused you so much trouble. You must be in pain from your fall, even now. May I grant you healing?”

“...You may.”

Ferdinand gave the girl Heilschmerz’s healing before offering her his hand and pulling her to her feet. He confirmed that she was no longer in pain, then swiftly descended the stage.

Beneath the stage, Detlinde’s attendants helped to remove her Goddess of Light robes. Ferdinand instructed for the clothes to be given to the Sovereign temple, then left the auditorium; Georgine had asked him to tend to his unconscious fiancée.

“The dedication whirl shall begin anew.”

The robes that Detlinde had worn were given to a priest of the Sovereign temple, who in turn handed them to a reserve archduke candidate. She rushed to put them on, then climbed onto the stage. The dedication whirl would recommence under the direction of the Sovereign High Bishop.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” Lestilaut began again.

And so, with the crowd still no less feverish, the dedication whirl was performed again. This one ended without incident—nobody started to glow, and the magic circle didn’t shine—and the bell announcing it was lunchtime rang soon after.

“From start to finish, Lady Detlinde sure was full of surprises,” Wilfried remarked. We had all seen her mountainous hairstyle, her glowing feystones, her sudden collapse, and the appearance of a mysterious magic circle, so it seemed safe to say that she was the hottest topic of this year’s graduation ceremony. Even in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, everyone was focused on her antics.

“I never knew that there was a magic circle there.”

Leonore exchanged a glance with Lieseleta and then said, “We graduating students were not able to see it.” They had been under the stage at the time, so the others who had watched from the raised audience seats explained what they had seen.

“Rozemyne, Charlotte,” Wilfried said, “didn’t that circle remind you of the one from Haldenzel? Er, it disappeared before anything happened, but still—both suddenly came up from a white stage and needed some kind of conditions to be met before they activated.”

Charlotte and I nodded. They might not have shared the same sigils and patterns, but they had both risen from an otherwise pure-white platform.

“Rozemyne, did you recognize that magic circle?” Sylvester asked, his eyes scrutinizing. “Dedication whirls are religious events too, so it wouldn’t surprise me.”

I shook my head and replied, “I did not. Dedication whirls are not performed in Ehrenfest, so it may be unique to the Sovereign temple.”

“I see...” Sylvester murmured. The dubious look on his face made it obvious that he still doubted me, but before anything else could be said about the matter, an ordonnanz arrived. We had almost finished our food, but it was still rare to receive such correspondence during lunchtime.

The bird landed in front of me and opened its beak. “Lady Rozemyne, this is Eglantine. Sorry to interrupt your lunch, but we are sending a messenger to your tea party room. Will you accept the letter they bring?” She was speaking peacefully, but the timing of this ordonnanz and what she was suggesting were practically unheard of under normal circumstances. Something major was happening.

I looked at Sylvester.

“Send a response,” he said. “We’re going to the tea party room.”

“Understood.” I sent a brief reply as advised, then rushed to finish my lunch. Once I was done, every member of the archducal family present for the Interduchy Tournament went to the tea party room, where we intended to drink tea and wait for the messenger.

“Retainers, stand down,” Sylvester said. “This is an urgent request from the royal family. We should clear the room ahead of time.”

Our retainers left, save for a few guard knights. Sylvester watched them go, then turned to Florencia with a look of genuine concern.

“I don’t expect this letter to be anything good. Shouldn’t you return to your room and rest?”

She shook her head. “Whether I am informed now or later does not matter; the shock will be the same. Thus, I shall stay here as Ehrenfest’s first wife.”

Sylvester gave a resigned nod.

“What might this be about?” I wondered aloud.

“The magic circle, obviously,” Sylvester replied. “That’s the only urgent business I can think of that can’t be settled via ordonnanz.”

I exhaled. In that case, we would need to consult Ferdinand too; I couldn’t say much on my own.

The mounting tension in the room was interrupted by the chime of a small bell, and Anastasius’s head attendant Oswin arrived as our messenger. He thanked us for having already cleared the room, then asked Sylvester for permission to use an area-affecting sound-blocker.

“I do not mind. Guard knights, step outside the range of the tool.”

Oswin activated the tool, then held out the letter. “Lady Rozemyne, this is from Prince Anastasius. I understand that this is exceptionally rude, but I have been instructed not to return without a reply.”

I opened the letter and read it. Anastasius sending his head attendant was enough for me to have guessed this was something major, but that didn’t stop my head from spinning. As it turned out, during lunch, the Sovereign High Bishop and High Priest had revealed that the magic circle we had all seen was meant for selecting the next Zent. In other words, Detlinde was now considered the best candidate to rule the entire country.

Wowee. Lady Detlinde’s ranked up from future aub to future Zent?

None of the royal family had known about the circle, and it hadn’t shone when Sigiswald, Anastasius, or Eglantine performed their dedication whirls. As a result, the Sovereign temple had taken its appearance now to mean that it was almost time for a proper Zent to be selected—one to replace the current Grutrissheit-less ruler.

Before any strange rumors could spread, Anastasius wanted to confirm that the magic circle really was for selecting the next Zent and that Detlinde truly was closest to taking the role. Apparently, if she managed to secure a Grutrissheit, Trauerqual intended to cede the throne to her.

Wait, are we seriously talking about Lady Detlinde being the next Zent?! Please, no! What kind of nightmare reality would that be?!

Because I was familiar with religious ceremonies and magic circles, they wanted my input on the Sovereign temple’s statements. Anastasius had even asked that I visit his villa in the afternoon when all of the Sovereign priests were busy with the graduation ceremony. It was phrased as a request, but when you considered the sender and the fact that a time had been specified... it was a de facto order.

“As much as it pains me, you are the only person outside of the Sovereign temple whom the royal family can consult about religious matters,” Oswin said. He was wearing his usual peaceful smile, but I sensed some anxiety in his voice. It was easy to imagine why. Anyone would quaver at the thought of an Ahrensbach archduke candidate who had worn her hair so ridiculously during her coming-of-age ceremony becoming Yurgenschmidt’s next ruler.

But this is beyond me! Aieeee! Ferdinand, help!

“The dedication whirl is an affair of the Sovereign temple,” Sylvester said. “Thus, Rozemyne knows nothing about it. Isn’t that right?”

I nodded again and again. Our cover story was that I didn’t know anything.

Sylvester looked at Oswin. “This is a royal summons, so I intend to let Rozemyne go. That said, the royal family is more likely to find the answers they seek from Ferdinand of Ahrensbach. You even have an excuse to speak with him, since this matter concerns his fiancée.”

Given the circumstances, we couldn’t refuse a royal summons—but Sylvester’s recommendation meant I would at least have Ferdinand with me.

Oswin nodded and took out his ordonnanz. He looked very clearly anxious as he said, “It seems probable that Lord Ferdinand will know more about the ritual. Ehrenfest has suggested that we summon him under the pretense of asking about Lady Detlinde.” He then sent the bird to Eglantine and returned his attention to Sylvester. “We thank you for your valuable proposal, Aub Ehrenfest.”

With that, Oswin retrieved the sound-blocking magic tool and briskly took his leave. It wasn’t long before only those of Ehrenfest’s archducal family remained in the tea party room. Everyone looked concerned.

“I never thought that circle would be for picking the next Zent...”

“Wilfried, don’t say that,” Sylvester protested. “We don’t yet know if that’s true, and I personally don’t believe it is. In any case—Rozemyne, bring back news of what Ferdinand says.”

“Right.”

Ahrensbach shared a border with Ehrenfest and was the new home of our Ferdinand. How this incident with Detlinde was dealt with would have an enormous impact on our duchy too, so we needed to know as much as we could.

“If the royal family wants to learn these things during the graduation ceremony, then everyone else should be acting normal,” Sylvester continued. “Rozemyne, we’ll make out that you took ill again. Rihyarda will go with you... and I think we can summon Karstedt if we hurry.”

Sylvester and everyone else would attend the graduation ceremony as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile, I would wait until the function was underway and then go to Anastasius’s villa with Rihyarda and Karstedt.

“Anyway, by asking them to summon Ferdinand, I’ve ensured that you’ll have a proper guardian there with you. Leave as much as you can to him, okay? Ideally, we want you to do nothing but listen.”

I nodded.

A Discussion with Eglantine

“My apologies for the abrupt summons,” Eglantine said, offering me a seat. We had just finished exchanging the usual greetings.

Oswin immediately began preparing an area-affecting sound-blocker, so Karstedt and Rihyarda stepped outside its range. I could see the worry on their faces.

Eglantine cleared the room of her retainers, sat on the sofa directly opposite me, and looked me dead in the eye. Anastasius was attending the graduation ceremony right now, so she was here in his place.

“Lady Rozemyne, we do not have much time,” she said. “May I speak frankly?”

Using obscure turns of phrase would only lead to misunderstandings, especially when I was far from being a master of noble phrasing. The more direct we were, the better—so I nodded and said, “Of course.”

Eglantine went on to explain the situation. The Sovereign High Bishop and High Priest had caused a stir during lunch by openly stating that the magic circle was for selecting the Zent. Some old-time retainers had responded that Trauerqual deserved the Grutrissheit for all his hard work, while others were concerned by the idea of Detlinde becoming Yurgenschmidt’s next ruler after what they had seen of her. Some had even claimed this was all a secret plot orchestrated by Ferdinand, who was now trying to manipulate his fiancée after losing control over me.

“Many opinions were expressed,” Eglantine continued, “but King Trauerqual considers the Grutrissheit essential to ruling Yurgenschmidt. He even said he would readily cede the throne to Lady Detlinde if she obtains one.”

“But why, when he sent Lord Ferdinand to Ahrensbach over similar suspicions?” I asked. Could the king not have waited for Ferdinand to get the Grutrissheit and then given the throne to him instead?

“At present, I can say only that the status of one’s duchy is of great importance. The upcoming Archduke Conference will see Ehrenfest treated equally to those on the winning side of the civil war, but you were considered a mere neutral duchy at the time. An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach, which made such great

contributions during the war, would naturally be preferred.”

It had apparently been decided that a Zent coming from Ehrenfest was unacceptable because of our duchy’s average rank, low number of Sovereign nobles, and insufficient diplomatic engagements with other duchies. It was impossible to say who would have allied with us if Ferdinand had obtained the Grutrissheit and become Zent. Many had worried that someone would then appear to steal the throne from him, and the last thing anyone wanted was another civil war.

Eglantine continued, “The civil war originally started when the first prince of the time began to resent the second prince inheriting the Grutrissheit and tried to take it for himself.” He had murdered the second prince in the process, but that did not grant him the Grutrissheit. From there, he began to suspect that the third prince, who was the maternal brother of the second prince, had the text instead... and thus began the war.

“The royal family lost kin and comrades over the Grutrissheit,” Eglantine said. “Thus, we are trying to avoid another conflict to the best of our ability. Lady Detlinde obtaining the Grutrissheit would be, um... fairly concerning. But if she has the wise and knowledgeable Lord Ferdinand supporting her as her husband, King Trauerqual believes she will perform her duties nonetheless.”

Please no. Ferdinand would die inside. The light would never return to his eyes.

“However,” she continued, “we do not know whether the Sovereign temple speaks true. That is why we need to learn all that we can about the magic circle, and as soon as possible.” Her orange eyes focused on me. “Lady Rozemyne, what do you think of their claims?”

I met her gaze, knowing that she wouldn’t let even the smallest lie go unnoticed, and gave a noble smile. “My apologies, Lady Eglantine. One whirls for their coming-of-age only at the Royal Academy. The custom is not followed in Ehrenfest.”

“So you do not know?” Eglantine asked, sighing.

Having to keep a secret from her made my heart ache, but I could at least take solace in knowing that I wasn’t outright lying to her. Sure, the bible said “ye who wish to be Zent,” but what did that really mean? One assumption was that the circle had something to do with the next ruler, but I didn’t know that for sure. I hadn’t even looked into it. Thus, I couldn’t give a better answer.

“The underground storage room of the Royal Academy contains various documents regarding religious ceremonies,” I said. “Lord Ferdinand has read them, so he might be of more help to you.”

As if on cue, Oswin announced that Ferdinand had arrived from Ahrensbach. Eglantine paused our conversation and stepped outside the range of the sound-blocking magic tool to greet her new guest.

Ferdinand alone entered the sound-blocker's area of effect; Eckhart and Justus waited with Karstedt and Rihyarda. Seeing them all together, I realized we had two parent-child reunions: Karstedt and Eckhart, and Rihyarda and Justus.

I'm sure they'll be stealthily exchanging information. Sylvester had given Karstedt a small, folded piece of paper to hand over, and Rihyarda was getting something ready too.

I watched them for a moment, then noticed that Ferdinand was looking down at me. His expression seemed to say, "Why are you here?"

"Lord Ferdinand, might I ask you to sit next to Lady Rozemyne?" Eglantine asked.

"Certainly. If you will excuse me."

"How is Lady Detlinde faring? Was she perhaps feeling unwell to begin with?"

"She was fine prior to the ceremony. The dedication whirl drained her of mana, which caused her to pass out. That said, I ensured she was fed a rejuvenation potion, so she is on the road to recovery. I apologize from the bottom of my heart that an Ahrensbach archduke candidate disturbed such a critical portion of the dedication whirl."

Her bizarre hairstyle, her sparkly whirling, her falling unconscious, her activation of an unknown magic circle... Ferdinand apologized for the sequence of bizarre and downright disturbing events.

"I did everything I could," he continued, "but she did not listen. My own shortcomings are to blame."

Ferdinand then took out and activated the sound-recorder he had left with this morning. Immediately, we heard him warning Detlinde not to wear five hairpins, since doing so would be seen as a slight against the royal family. Detlinde then replied that she would remove some, though she sounded very dissatisfied.

"I never thought she would replace the hairpins with other decorations," Ferdinand said.

"I see you've had a rough day..." I remarked without thinking.

Eglantine gave a similarly troubled smile. "Lady Detlinde's own decisions led to all this, so we will not hold you accountable. You may rest easy."

Ferdinand visibly relaxed, but then his brow furrowed. "I expected a harsh lecture when I received an urgent summons so soon after the incident... I suppose asking me about her well-being is an excuse and you instead wish to speak with me about Rozemyne."

"You are only half-correct," she continued with an apologetic smile. "During lunch, the Sovereign temple revealed some information that has sparked chaos. We must now gather information of our own,

and we have heard from both Aub Ehrenfest and Lady Rozemyne that you are well informed about the ways of the temple.”

For some reason, Ferdinand glared at me. This time, he seemed to want to say, “Do not get me wrapped up in these things.”

“I simply said you know of these matters better than I. Is that not true?”

Ferdinand let out a defeated sigh and said, “I shall ask what happened.”

Eglantine and I explained what we had already discussed. Then, Eglantine asked, “Lord Ferdinand, are you familiar with the magic circle that appeared on the stage?”

He nodded slowly and said that he was, then fell silent. Eglantine must have realized that he didn’t intend to say anything else, because she continued her questioning.

“The Sovereign temple claims its purpose is to select a Zent.”

“To be frank, I am surprised they know that. Those of the Sovereign temple are scarcely able to read the bible.”

As he said, last year’s investigation had revealed that the Sovereign temple could only read half of the bible at most. I was pretty confident that they hadn’t been able to see the magic circle at the start of the bible, and yet they managed to identify it when it flashed on the stage for just a couple of seconds. Impressive!

“Ehrenfest’s temple contains boards, documents, and old transcriptions of the bible for gray priests to use when preparing rituals,” I said. “Perhaps the Sovereign temple has its own documents that do not require mana to be read.” My mind raced as I tried to imagine what wonders awaited me in this unfamiliar book room.

Ferdinand glared at me in a way that said, “I do not disagree with your opinion, but keep silent.” In accordance with his wishes, I swiftly buttoned it.

Eglantine gave a bemused smile and then frowned. “Does that mean the Sovereign temple is telling the truth about the magic circle?”

“They are not entirely mistaken... but why are you asking both Rozemyne and me these questions?”

Eglantine placed a hand on her cheek. “Though it shames me to admit, nobody in the royal family is familiar with religious ceremonies.” Because of their strained relationship with the Sovereign temple, they couldn’t access the documents needed to fight back against its claims. “Lady Rozemyne’s Dedication Ritual within the Royal Academy was evidence enough that she is a genuine High Bishop who performs true rituals. We thus hoped to receive your advice at this concerning time...”

“I expect she has already informed you that the underground

archive beneath the Royal Academy's library contains documents of great importance to you and to the country's archduke candidates. I struggle to see why the royal family does not already have the information it seeks, unless..." He glared at me. "Did she *not* inform you, despite her frequent encounters with members of the royal family?"

I vigorously shook my head and said, "I told them. I went with the three princes and even helped them to translate the text into modern vernacular."

"Despite my warning that you should not enter the archive under any circumstances?"

In my desperation to prove my innocence, I'd revealed another of my sins. "I-It was a royal decree!" I sputtered. "They didn't allow me to refuse!" There really hadn't been anything I could do.

"Lady Rozemyne is very talented when it comes to understanding old language," Eglantine chimed in. "Her talents assisted us a great deal, so I must ask that you do not chastise her."

"Rozemyne has eyes only for books," Ferdinand said plainly. "It is impossible to predict how she might cause offense, and this becomes even more dangerous when we consider that the archive is only accessible to the royal family and select archduke candidates. Our only option is to forbid her entry to begin with."

There was nothing I could say in protest. During my visit with the princes, I'd given Sigiswald half-baked answers and ended up needing Anastasius to drag me out.

"Be that as it may—what else could I do?" I asked. "Neither Prince Sigiswald nor Prince Anastasius is knowledgeable about ancient language. Lady Hannelore and I are scheduled to help them again during the coming spring's Archduke Conference."

Ferdinand grimaced. "They wish for *you* to interpret? Then the information they seek will remain buried for a very long time."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You always start at the top left of whatever bookcase you are presented with, correct? That is how you approached the book rooms in the temple, Karstedt's estate, and the castle—as well as my own bookshelves. I seem to recall the documents about the magic circle in question being near the bottom, so it would take many moons for you to reach it."

It's a habit of mine. Starting from one end is the best way to make sure I don't miss anything. I didn't realize he'd noticed, though!

"In any case," Ferdinand continued, "I must emphasize that the archive is replete with knowledge essential for the next Zent. If you do not already know about the rituals and ceremonies of the temple, that is where you should start. Learning to read ancient language would

also be in your best interest.”

“The royal family does not have the time to invest in such an endeavor,” Eglantine said.

I recalled what a state the king had been in before, back when he’d looked as haggard as Ferdinand, and the devotion with which he offered mana. It really was hard to imagine him having the time to study.

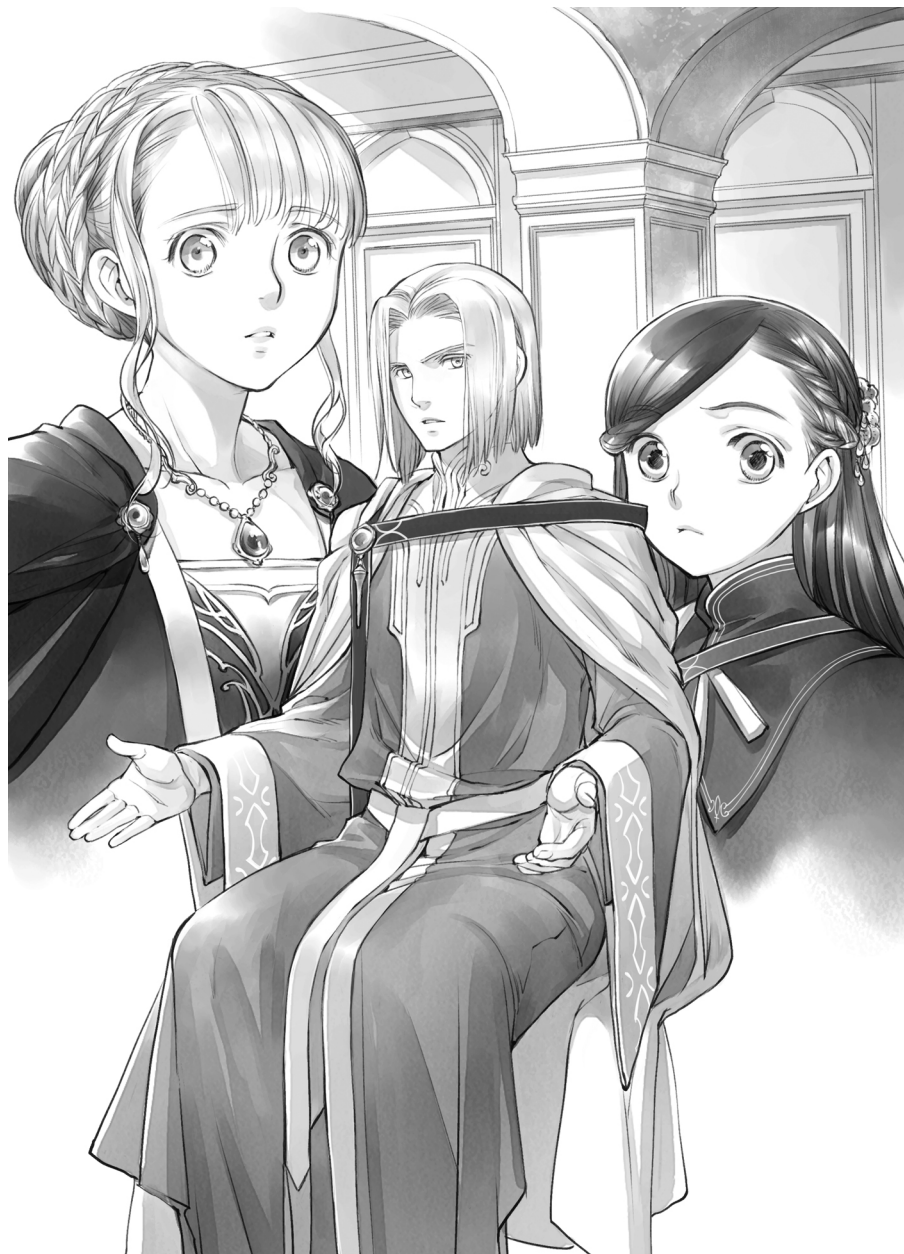
Ferdinand shook his head. “Rozemyne’s interpretation skills were developed within a mere season or two while she was memorizing the prayers necessary for rituals and devoting herself to reading the bible, all while striving to save the children of an orphanage. I understand that the royal family has much on its plate already, but if you study with the same dedication she did, then you will surely learn what you seek.”

Eglantine gave me a strange look. I could vaguely remember spending most of my days as an apprentice blue shrine maiden staring at boards, trying to memorize prayers. All those years ago, I’d complained about the names of the gods being way too confusing and hard to remember.

Ferdinand continued, “On this occasion, because you truly are short on time, I will provide the answers you desire. But if you do not learn to read the relevant documents on your own, you will never know how information might be being twisted. I sincerely believe that understanding such language is an essential skill for a Zent. The Grutrissheit granted by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom is likely even older than the bibles held by High Bishops.”

Eglantine looked up with a start. It hadn’t really crossed my mind before, but he was right—the bible and its instructions for becoming king were sure to be more modern than the Grutrissheit.

“The magic circle *does* identify Zent candidates,” Ferdinand said. “However, it would not be at all correct to say that Lady Detlinde making the circle appear means she is closest to being the next Zent.” It was an explanation for Eglantine, but I was listening closely too. The only thing I knew about the circle was that it rose from the bible when I opened it.



“In the Royal Academy, when an intelligent and competent archduke candidate or member of the royal family came of age, that dedication whirl would be performed to see whether they had sufficient mana to become Zent.”

The circle would appear when one prayed and offered their mana to the gods while whirling. For those with all elements and enough mana, a pillar of light would appear.

He continued, “Only those who could make this light appear were allowed to continue to the next stage of the selection process. Lady Detlinde could not even activate the magic circle, meaning she cannot be considered a candidate.”

“But neither Prince Anastasius nor I was able to activate the circle...” Eglantine said, concerned. If nobody in the royal family had managed it, then maybe the Sovereign temple was right in saying that Detlinde was better suited to becoming the next Zent than any of them.

“Above all else, one must offer prayers and mana while whirling. The magic circle only appeared for Lady Detlinde because she was expelling mana to make the feystones on her clothes shine. Thus, it was pure coincidence. I would even advise that the royal family experiment with this for themselves. You are fortunate that Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger’s joint research publicized the means by which to increase one’s elements. Perhaps you could perform religious ceremonies and mana offerings, repeat the ritual for obtaining divine protections, then activate the magic circle yourselves.”

“Offer mana during a dedication whirl, hm...? As you are both experts when it comes to rituals, could we ask for your assistance?” Eglantine’s gaze landed on me. “Lady Rozemyne gives blessings even when she is just practicing her whirl, does she not?”

Ferdinand shot down Eglantine without hesitation. “We do not wish to be viewed with even greater suspicion. Rozemyne would surely form the magic circle more easily than Lady Detlinde, considering her mana quantity and the frequency with which she prays, but that alone does not decide the next Zent. She would only be a candidate. The truly important part is what follows.”

“What follows...?” Eglantine quietly repeated.

Ferdinand did not answer her question. Instead, he moved on to discussing the potential repercussions of getting me involved.

“Even if Rozemyne were to be chosen to rule Yurgenschmidt, the royal family should know better than anyone that Ehrenfest is not equipped to support a Zent. Furthermore, if this experimentation with dedication whirling is done en masse, there is a chance that new Zent candidates will appear one after another, from every single duchy.

That will only sow the seeds of chaos, which is why the royal family must keep this investigation to themselves.”

Eglantine’s eyes wandered the room for a moment until she finally—and very hesitantly—spoke again. “Lord Ferdinand, what do you think about those who suspect you are using Lady Rozemyne and Lady Detlinde to search for the Gruttrissheit—that you wish to take the throne yourself?”

“I can only assume that your knight commander is among them,” Ferdinand said, unmoved. “It was because my actions were deemed suspicious that I was sent to Ahrensbach, and now Lady Detlinde activated this unknown magic circle.”

His calmness irritated me. He had suffered and endured so much through going to Ahrensbach, and now his loyalty was being questioned even further? That ticked me the heck off, to the point that I could no longer hold my tongue.

“I am astounded by the sheer stupidity of those the Zent surrounds himself with. I would hope you have not forgotten that Ferdinand initially *refused* Aub Ahrensbach’s offer. He relocated only because the royal family disregarded his wishes and sent him away by royal decree.”

Eglantine’s eyes widened at my uncensored remarks. She should have been glad that I’d clung to enough restraint not to add, “The memories of royals are shockingly convenient.”

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, fixing me with his sternest glare yet, “I believe I told you to remain silent.”

Frankly, he could shove it.

“If we do not make the truth and our intentions heard, the royal family will never understand them,” I shot back, half shouting. “We are better off speaking honestly than remaining silent and acting unmoved while letting hate and resentment build in our hearts. *You* taught me to use conversations to tie up any loose ends!”

“But not when it means being so rude to a member of the royal family.”

“You worried that following the royal decree would cause you to break your final promise to your father, but you went along with it anyway to clear all these suspicions. If the royal family and their lot are going to question you even now, then what was the point in you accepting to begin with?”

Ferdinand fell silent for a moment, at a loss for words.

“Rozemyne, you must stop. I do not matter in this—”

“You *do* matter. That’s my point. We cannot allow politeness to stifle our true thoughts. We must be direct about our feelings and intentions instead of trying to communicate through others. Isn’t that right, Lady Eglantine?”

She smiled and nodded. "It certainly is. Lord Ferdinand, if you have your own circumstances, I wish to hear them. This may not sound like much, but perhaps I will be able to help."

"I do not know the grounds on which the royal family and knight commander are basing their suspicions," I said, "but clinging to them is pointless. Ferdinand is only interested in research and is happiest when locked away in his workshop in our duchy's temple. If given the option, he would slink away and spend an entire lifetime immersed in his work."

Eglantine giggled. "Is this true, Lord Ferdinand?"

Ferdinand pinched my cheek, then sighed. "It is up to the royal family whether they elect to believe this, but I have absolutely no intention of becoming Zent." Of course, convincing Eglantine didn't mean that everyone else would trust him too, but having even just one member of the royal family in our corner would change the situation dramatically.

"Have you truly never thought to use your knowledge of various rituals to obtain the Grutrissheit?" she asked, watching him carefully.

A terribly bitter smile spread across Ferdinand's lips. "Not for a moment. All good Zents must give up everything for the sake of the country. I have no desire to take such a wearying role."

"I know exactly what you mean," I said. "Becoming the Zent would make you too busy to do any research, right? It would be like me losing my reading time."

"Do not project your own motivations onto me," he replied, grimacing for some reason.

"Hm? Are there reasons other than having less research time?"

"Yes, but I find that I no longer care about them."

Then I guess they weren't important, right?

Eglantine looked between the two of us and then said, "Lady Rozemyne, I have one more question for you. Aub Klassenberg informed me that Ehrenfest declined to perform another Dedication Ritual next year as joint research."

"Indeed," I replied. "The burden would be too great for Ehrenfest."

I explained that Ehrenfest had needed to conclude its own Dedication Ritual early so that the necessary tools could be transported to the Royal Academy, that we had experienced troubles when our High Priest was only allowed to stay for the day of the ritual, and that preparing so many rejuvenation potions had greatly depleted our resources. There was also the fact that I would probably need to return to Ehrenfest next year to help out with our next Dedication Ritual.

"Do you know what Klassenberg intended to contribute to that

research?" I asked out of curiosity.

"That is what the aub wishes to discuss. He seemed quite troubled about being refused before negotiations could even begin."

"However, one cannot order their temple to provide divine instruments for a Dedication Ritual in the Royal Academy. It will impact the next year's harvest. Furthermore, as I explained during the ritual, the recipe for our rejuvenation potions is not my own creation."

Eglantine looked at Ferdinand, having apparently deduced whom the recipe belonged to, and he met her gaze without a word. Joint research between Ehrenfest and Klassenberg was of no concern to him, and there was no reason for him to provide any assistance; by this time next year, he would be married to Detlinde and officially be a resident of Ahrensbach. Plus, rather than publicizing his recipe for us, he was much better off saving it as a trump card. One couldn't have enough fail-safes when it came to cleaning up after Detlinde and trying to avoid guilt by association.

I continued, "As you can expect, I support Klassenberg's wish to offer the royal family as much mana as possible, but can this really be considered research for students to do at the Royal Academy? If one intends to make this Dedication Ritual an annual event rather than a one-off research project, we will *at least* require the Sovereign temple to lend its divine instruments and priests, and the Sovereignty to prepare rejuvenation potions made using whichever recipe they deem best. Ehrenfest can provide its High Bishop and nothing more; otherwise, the new custom would not last for very long at all."

What I *really* meant to say was "I don't want to spend potential reading time preparing for and cleaning up after research that serves no purpose except to give mana to the royal family." I thought I'd done an excellent job of sugarcoating it, but maybe not. As I was patting myself on the back, Ferdinand gave me a look as though I were a poorly raised child and started rubbing his temples.

Hmm. I sense that I've made a mistake of some kind. Again.

"I understand your perspective, Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said. "An annual occurrence is far more taxing to maintain than a one-off event. I will discuss all we have talked about today with the royal family and Aub Klassenberg."

And with that, our conversation with Eglantine came to an end—and before the graduation ceremony concluded. I'd come in response to a summons from Anastasius, but Ferdinand had come at Eglantine's own request. The prince would probably understand, especially considering the urgent circumstances, but I nevertheless had a feeling that his jealousy would make things a bit annoying.

As always, Prince Anastasius remains the spitting image of Ewigeliebe.

Lending Books and a Place for One's Heart

After saying our farewells, we swiftly made our way out of Anastasius's villa. We didn't have any sound-blocking magic tools with us, and we had our retainers in tow, so Ferdinand and I couldn't discuss the magic circle or anything else of consequence. Instead, our conversation was limited to the joint research.

"Are you truly witless?" Ferdinand asked. "Why did you not end the conversation by saying that you would discuss things with Aub Ehrenfest?"

"Joint research is the work of students and does not require external approval," I replied, more or less repeating what Sylvester had said.

"That would normally be the case," Ferdinand said with a frown, "but your joint research goes far beyond the realm of students; it involves the aubs of the participating duchies and even members of the royal family. Furthermore, with those trivial conditions you set, the ritual will inevitably become an annual event. What will you do after your graduation?"

"Melchior will take my place as High Bishop. There's plenty of time to prepare him."

And then there's that new baby on the way.

By the time Sylvester and Florencia's new child enrolled at the Royal Academy, Wilfried would probably be having his own kids. We were planning to make one of Melchior's retainers the High Priest after Hartmut, so even if the ritual did become a yearly occurrence, we would be equipped to repeat it ad infinitum.

Though, wait... If Wilfried has children, won't I be the one bearing them? Hmm... I wonder how that'll feel.

I hadn't experienced love, marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth as Urano, so I couldn't even begin to imagine them.

It wasn't far from Anastasius's villa to the Ehrenfest Dormitory, so our exchange was ultimately a brief one.

"Well then, Ferdinand... do be conscious of your health as you work," I said.

"You do not need to repeat yourself. Besides, if anyone needs to be more cautious here, it is you. Do not let your guard down now that you have become healthier."

“Right. Well... I suppose we’ll next see each other during the spring Starbind Ceremony?”

“Who can say...?” Ferdinand replied, not giving a clear answer. He paused for a moment, in thought, then muttered, “It is more than likely that the Sovereign temple will do something troublesome. I always pray from the bottom of my heart for you not to get involved in such matters, but no words can bind you, I have found.”

“Ngh... It may not look like it, but I *am* doing my best to avoid trouble.”

It wasn’t like I was diving into problems by choice; I would merely blink and then find myself caught in a storm. Ferdinand didn’t understand, though. He just looked down at me with cold eyes and said, “Avoid trouble? It is hard to see your actions thus far as anything but charging headlong into it.”

“The gap between subjectivity and objectivity certainly is vast...” I solemnly remarked.

“Indeed, and you would do well to lean more toward the latter.”

Rihyarda had opened the door for me, so I stepped through it and into the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Meanwhile, Ferdinand continued down the corridor toward the door of Ahrensbach the Sixth. We were wearing capes of the same color but going to separate places. It felt... strange.

“Whew. Finally done,” Karstedt hummed, rolling his shoulders as soon as we were in the dormitory. “Serving as a guard in a royal villa really tenses me up. I’m glad Lord Ferdinand was there.” As it turned out, it was pretty tiring having to wait outside a sound-blocking magic tool and not know what was being discussed.

“I thank you ever so much for going out of your way to guard me, Father. How is Ehrenfest?”

He looked conflicted for a moment and then said, “That should probably wait until we both get back. We made an agreement not to bring that business into the Royal Academy.” Then, he awkwardly patted me on the head.

“What’s this for?”

“Er, you’ve come first-in-class three years in a row now, haven’t you? Well done. I couldn’t congratulate you while I was on guard duty, and now’s my only real chance.” Apparently, he wouldn’t be able to speak so openly once we were back in Ehrenfest.

“This might be the first time you’ve praised me like this, Father.”

“You think so? Hm... Well, my own father is fairly excited this year. I need to be careful that he doesn’t throw you around or crush you in a hug.”

I was glad that Bonifatius was so pleased for me, but we’d need to be on guard; letting him get too excited would seriously endanger my

life. I hoped that we could at least hold hands and walk together like last year, but that might have been too big of an ask.

While waiting for everyone to get back from the graduation ceremony, I sat down near the common room fireplace and started getting immersed in the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine*. Having this time to myself made me realize that I hadn't been given many opportunities to read as of late; I'd simply been too busy.

Karstedt was guarding me all the while.

"Is Rozemyne here?" Wilfried called, rushing into the common room. There were other students with him, but none of the graduates; there was about to be something of a feast in their honor.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Lady Hannelore has a book from Dunkelfelger and Lord Lestilaut's illustrations. She's asked to visit our tea party room before you return home so she can give them to you. She also wants to borrow a new book, but when's a good time for that?"

I'd now checked through the new Fernestine volume, so that was probably safe to give. I really couldn't wait to get my hands on those forgotten divine tales that Dunkelfelger had preserved.

"The sooner, the better... but I suppose tomorrow would be *too* soon? Let us make it two days from now. I will send an ordonnanz of acknowledgment."

"Right. I'll leave that to you."

I asked Brunhilde to make all of the necessary arrangements with Dunkelfelger while I permitted Muriella to read the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine*.

Now that the Interduchy Tournament and the graduation ceremony were complete, everyone was kicking back. Nobody was rushing around, and any sense of urgency had been replaced with a relaxing calm as we all welcomed the end of another academic year.

"The aub has called for each archduke candidate to fetch one attendant and gather in a meeting room," announced one of Sylvester's attendants.

I chose to bring Rihyarda and then headed straight there. It appeared that the Knight's Order was keeping a close watch over the room, which explained why we hadn't been asked to bring any guards of our own. Florencia wasn't present, since she was recovering in her room.

After confirming that we were all present, Sylvester began. I could guess that he wanted to question me about my conversation with Eglantine.

"I'll start by summarizing the events of the graduation ceremony, since Rozemyne wasn't there to see it. The Sovereign High Bishop

announced that the magic circle everyone saw during the dedication whirl is for selecting the next Zent. Naturally, this caused a massive fuss.”

Those of the Sovereign temple had apparently been quite moved when they saw the magic circle appear. They had found out about it in their book room but hadn’t known where it could be found or what ritual activated it.

Despite the Sovereign High Bishop’s enthusiasm, most of the attending nobles had strongly doubted his claims. After seeing how much Detlinde had embarrassed herself during the dedication whirl, it was hard to believe that she of all people was closest to becoming Yurgenschmidt’s next ruler—and it certainly didn’t help that people trusted and valued the words of the temple so little to begin with.

“They said the time will soon come when Mestionora grants the proper Zent a copy of the Grutrissheit,” Sylvester continued.

“Rozemyne, what did Ferdinand say about that magic circle?” He heaved an exasperated sigh. “I can’t imagine that girl becoming the next Zent either.”

“He said that it really is for selecting the Zent candidates—but because Detlinde couldn’t properly activate it, she failed the selection process. She is not a Zent candidate.”

“I see. That’s kinda good to know, but I can’t believe that really is the circle’s purpose...”

From there, I explained the rest of my discussion with Eglantine. I mentioned that Ferdinand’s loyalty was once again being called into question and recounted how he had scolded me for trying to clear his name.

“So the royal family accepted your argument, huh...? Good to know.”

“She also questioned us about doing research with Klassenberg. I said that I wouldn’t mind participating as the High Bishop but only if they make all the other preparations themselves.” I then added that Eglantine had warned me to negotiate with Klassenberg properly, but Sylvester responded with a frown.

“I appreciate the warning.”

The next day, Sylvester rushed a fairly sick-looking Florencia back to Ehrenfest. I helped Philine look through the reports and manuscripts provided to us by students and decided what we would pay for them, then spent the rest of my time reading.

“If you will excuse us, we must now be going to repeat our rituals.”

Graduating students of duchies that had participated in the Dedication Ritual were being allowed another chance to obtain divine

protections. To that end, they departed for the auditorium.

Come the end of the repeat rituals, most of the students who obtained new divine protections were apprentice knights who had been practicing to obtain regular blessings. It was a pretty expected outcome, all in all. Leonore and Alexis obtained protections from Angriff the God of War and Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale.

"I similarly obtained the divine protection of Heilschmerz," Lieseleta reported. Inspired by all the times she saw me heal others, she had gone around healing the training apprentice knights to obtain the divine protection she sought. Maybe that was why she was so popular with them.

Okay, okay... I know that's not the reason. She has a pretty face, attendants are always so nice and considerate about the littlest things, and she's great at both sewing and embroidery. Her girl power is off the charts!

I was sure there was a lot I could learn from her, but I wasn't going to surrender even a minute of my reading time. Books were obviously more important than being ladylike.

Another day passed, and it came time for our scheduled meeting with Hannelore. I waited in our tea party room, ready to give her the newest installment of *The Story of Fernestine*, and it wasn't long before a bell chimed on the other side of the door. Hannelore had arrived right at the agreed-upon time.

"I thank you ever so much for making the time to meet with me," she said. "I realize you must be busy with your preparations to return home, but I have been terribly concerned about what happens in the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine*."

"I know the feeling well; I am likewise curious about the book you have brought. I am also glad to have this opportunity to speak with you, Lady Hannelore."

As we greeted one another, her apprentice scholars came in bearing two thick Dunkelfelger books and quite an impressive pile of artwork.

"Oh, two volumes...?"

"You have lent me so many books, Lady Rozemyne, and I hoped this would serve as an apology for all the ditter business. Both are about religious stories. Mother gave her permission as well."

Oh, what a nice woman Lady Sieglinde is!

Once the apprentice scholars finished their exchange, I gestured for Hannelore to sit. We were having tea and yogurt mousse tart, and I tried some of each to begin our tea party.

"These are my brother's illustrations," Hannelore said. "Ehrenfest may do with them as they please."

The apprentice scholars performed the handover, then I started going through the illustrations. There were so many that I couldn't pick which to use for *A Ditter Story*. It seemed best to have Wilfried or Roderick, the author, make the decision.

"These truly are wonderful," I said.

As I continued to look at the illustrations, I noticed the focus change from ditter to... me. And not just on parchment—there were plenty drawn on plant paper too. Thumbing through the pages made it look like I was spinning. Lestilaut had essentially made a flip-book animation.

"I see this one is colored," I said, having caught glimpses of paint on a big rolled-up scroll. I opened it up to see another, grander piece depicting my dedication whirl. My arms were raised, my sleeves billowed, and my skirt ballooned with air. Adorning my hair as dark as the night sky were numerous feystones shining with light of all different colors.

This was unmistakably a painting of me, but at the same time, it really *wasn't*. I almost wanted to ask who the heck it was supposed to be. My retainers looked with wide eyes and murmured among themselves.

"Um, Lady Hannelore... This is an illustration of my whirling practice, correct?" I asked haltingly. "Is this how it looked to Lord Lestilaut?" I was hoping she would say he had only been fascinated by the shining feystones and had used someone else as the model, but instead...

"He found your unique dedication whirl so beautiful that he felt compelled to capture it as soon as he could. I was so focused on my own whirling that I missed your display—a fact that I regret even now."

According to Hannelore, after I took my leave, everyone had erupted into conversation about how wonderfully intense my whirl had been to witness. She had naturally been drawn into their discussion.

"It really is a shame that my timing is so poor," she concluded.

"I see" was my half-hearted reply as I rolled the scroll back up. It really didn't seem like a painting of me, and the thought that Lestilaut had created it made me feel a little... embarrassed. Or shy, maybe.

Something tells me I should seal this away. I'm not sure why, but it feels... dangerous.

"Could it be that Lord Lestilaut is fond of dedication whirling as a whole?" I asked.

"Perhaps," Hannelore replied. "He once painted Lady Eglantine's whirling, so I would not discount the possibility."

That was a relief to hear. If a painting of *me* was this beautiful,

then one of Eglantine must have been genuinely stunning.

"I would very much like to see that painting at some point," I said. "And please tell Lord Lestilaut that I am ever so grateful he depicted me so beautifully."

"But of course."

"Speaking of dedication whirls... this year's certainly was dramatic. The Goddess of Light fell unconscious. As the God of Darkness, Lord Lestilaut must have been very shocked."

"Oh, definitely. He also never expected that she would fall toward him in such a manner."

It was customary in Yurgenschmidt for an adult woman to only let her hair down when in bed, which made it a privilege exclusive to her husband and attendants. This had made things especially troubling for Lestilaut. Not only had Detlinde's hairdo shamefully come undone, *in public*, but she had then almost collapsed on him. He had wanted to help her, but he hadn't been sure whether it was even acceptable to touch her when she was in such a state and her fiancé by royal decree was so close by.

"Did you recognize the magic circle that appeared?" Hannelore asked. "The Sovereign High Bishop said its purpose is to choose the next Zent..."

"I'm told that more detailed documents about it can be found in the underground archive. Perhaps you could seek them out during the upcoming Archduke Conference. The royal family is in great need of them too." For obvious reasons, I elected not to mention that Ferdinand was my source or that Eglantine had questioned me.

Hannelore nodded. "It seems we will be very busy indeed during the Archduke Conference."

"Speaking of which... how are Lord Lestilaut and the others of your duchy doing? I heard many criticize their 'surrender' during the Interduchy Tournament."

"My brother was very disappointed to have so much of his art confiscated, and the knights have grown very quiet since Mother scolded them." Her lips curled into a half-smile. "To be honest, life has been much easier for me as of late."

She was probably exaggerating a little, but I was still glad to hear she was doing well.

Hannelore continued, "I look forward to reading the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine* when I return home. The first book ended with her meeting the prince and at last obtaining some happiness after years of abuse. I am so looking forward to seeing her thrive."

Seeing her optimistic smile made my heart ache. *I'm sorry, Lady Hannelore. In this volume, when Fernestine's at her happiest, she gets torn*

from the prince and receives a royal decree ordering her to marry another man! Don't worry, though—the story will continue in a future volume! Not that I'll tell you any of this. I want you to experience it all for yourself.

"I enjoyed *Royal Academy Love Stories* and cannot wait to see Fernestine's tale continue," Hannelore said. "Speaking of which, Lady Rozemyne... what kind of man do you see yourself falling for? I recall you once mentioned your appreciation of men with great minds who never give up, but I wish to know more."

This is kind of nostalgic. I don't think I've had a conversation like this since my Urano days.

My honest answer was that I didn't care one bit about romance, but saying that would be like asking to get booted from female society. During conversations like this, empathy and secret-sharing were key.

"Lady Rozemyne, you said that your parents chose Lord Wilfried as your fiancé, did you not? Is there another man you consider more ideal or closer to your heart?"

Guess I'll need to lie, huh? Easy. Back on Earth, I made up a completely imaginary crush just to make sure a friendship of mine went smoothly!

During my Urano days, my fake love interest had always saved my skin whenever Shuu's girlfriend assumed I was crushing on him.

At a time like this, it was best to model your imaginary crush on someone your conversation partner didn't know. If you used a boy they were familiar with, there was a risk they might put two and two together and start spreading rumors—and if you created an entirely new person, you were bound to trip up sooner or later. Oh, and the most important part was to conclude with "Though they barely even know I exist."

So, who shall my model be? It should probably be someone really obscure, since my retainers are all within earshot. Anyone involved in the Royal Academy is automatically out, but excluding nobles really doesn't leave me with many options. Hmm... I guess Lutz or Fran would work.

"Keep this our little secret, but... although I am engaged to Wilfried, there is someone I treasure much more," I whispered.

Hannelore's eyes widened. "Th-There is?"

"Indeed. There is someone who has supported and stood by me ever since I was young—before my baptism, even. He always saved me whenever I grew depressed or found myself on the verge of giving up entirely. It has become much harder for us to see each other... but even so, the promise we made remains firmly in my heart. Of course, keep this between us."

Hannelore bobbed her head in a very enthusiastic nod.

"What kind of men do you like, Lady Hannelore?"

“M-Me? Well... men who are the opposite of my brother. He, um... seldom ever listens to my opinions.” She looked around sheepishly, then pressed a finger to her lips. “But keep that a secret from him.”

Her retainers were all watching her with heartwarming expressions, but I understood exactly how she felt.

And so, using my experience from my Urano days, I managed to engage in possibly the most important part of girl talk: sharing secrets. Our tea party ended a while later, and I came away with two new books in my possession.

Wow... I handled today perfectly, didn't I? Not a single mistake.

My socializing in the Royal Academy was complete—and with that, I returned to Ehrenfest.

Epilogue

After the graduation ceremony concluded, students would leave the Royal Academy and return home. This was true for every duchy. Even in Ahrensbach, luggage was being carried to the dormitory's teleportation hall stack by stack.

"Lady Detlinde," called Martina, an apprentice attendant. "Everything is ready. Shall we go home?"

Detlinde looked across the common room, her brow furrowed in a very clear show of dissatisfaction. "I am a graduating student, you know. Much like Fatiehe, my intention is to stay here at the Royal Academy until the very last moment. Do recall that my ceremony was cut unfairly short."

After expending far too much mana during her dedication whirl, Detlinde had been rendered unconscious for two days—and the instant she awoke, she had started angrily ranting about "Lady Rozemyne's trickery" ruining her precious graduation ceremony. Martina recalled how she and the other retainers had all worked to cheer her up by informing her of the Sovereign High Bishop's words. "He said you're closest to being the next Zent!" they had cried. "And naturally so!"

That aside, it was indeed a privilege for graduating students to remain in the dormitory until the very end of the academic year, but few wanted the ever-selfish Detlinde to stay. Her continued presence would compel the other graduating students to be overly considerate, and her retainers from lower years would not be able to return home. Furthermore, with the passing of the archduke, there was much for her to do back in Ahrensbach.

Above all else, nobody wanted her to cause any more trouble at the Royal Academy than she had already.

Her troublemaking affects our grades as attendants, after all.

Martina exchanged a look with her fellow retainers; they needed to think of a way to raise Detlinde's spirits. Soon enough, Fatiehe herself came forward.

"I understand your desire to stay all too well, Lady Detlinde, but your presence here will make it harder for the first-years to leave. If possible, we would ask that you go back to Ahrensbach for your greetings."

Martina nodded. "If you are waiting for them, everyone will

surely rush to return home.”

Detlinde gave a self-satisfied smile and started toward the teleportation hall. “My, my. I suppose we cannot have the first-years waiting *forever* in my honor. Very well, then. Professor Fraularm, do take care of matters in my absence.”

Detlinde’s head attendant hurried alongside her, while the other retainers worked together to remove any and all potential distractions.

“That’s our biggest job done,” Martina said, heaving a relieved sigh. They had somehow convinced Detlinde to leave on schedule. Her adult retainers would be awaiting her arrival on the other side of the teleporter, which meant those still at the Royal Academy could get some much-needed rest while their belongings were being packed.

Martina continued, “Fatiehe, you are the same age as Lady Detlinde, correct? Please spend these coming days at your leisure. You also have to speak with your fiancé, I imagine.”

“And you are a fifth-year,” Fatiehe replied, “which means you will get an entire year of peace here at the Royal Academy. I must express some envy.”

“So you say, but you were late to become her retainer and are due to marry into another duchy next spring. I would much prefer that.”

Martina had received an instruction from her father to join Lady Georgine’s faction immediately after her baptism, so she had scarcely had any time to relax. On top of that, since she was favored by Detlinde, the next aub, it would be hard for her to escape to another duchy through marriage.

“Furthermore,” she continued, “Father is already finding me a partner in Ahrensbach. He must consider it our duty as a branch of the archducal family to support the aub.”

“Oh, of course. Your father used to be *in* the archducal family, correct? In Ahrensbach, as soon as the aub changes, the other archduke candidates are demoted to archnobles—but that did not occur in Werkestock. You would have been an archduke candidate in another duchy. Truly a shame.”

Indeed, Martina had on many occasions tried to imagine being an archducal family member with her own retainers, as opposed to an archnoble required to serve another. But now she rejected that fantasy.

“I do not consider it one,” she said. “My mother is from Frenbeltag. Being in an archducal family might have cost me my life.”

During the purge that followed the civil war, many among the losing duchies’ archducal families had been executed. That was common knowledge. Frenbeltag had lost its archducal couple and the pair due to succeed them, while the child of the third wife—a boy who had never been involved in politics—was assigned to rule

instead. Meanwhile, Ahrensbach's second wife, from Werkestock, was executed. Her two children were spared after much pleading from their archduke, but they were still demoted to archnobles.

"As I understand it," Fatiehe said, "because of the purge, Lady Georgine's son Lord Wolfram was the only male archduke candidate remaining in Ahrensbach. I do not know the details, though. I only became a retainer after his sudden passing away, when Lady Detlinde was chosen to be the next aub."

Fatiehe was an archnoble from Old Werkestock, which was now under Ahrensbach management. During that tumultuous period, nobody had known how their duchy would be treated. Little wonder, then, that she knew so little about Ahrensbach's circumstances. She had also likely been hesitant about questioning the death of her lady's older brother.

Martina searched her memories. After the purge, Georgine had collected a force to oppose Ahrensbach's first wife, with Wolfram at its core. To incorporate the second wife's faction, she had arranged a marriage between her daughter Alstede and Blasius, one of the second wife's sons who had been demoted to an archnoble. Their child was to be adopted into the archducal family, as Georgine's child.

"At the time of my baptism, Lady Georgine did not have much power," she eventually said. "A middle duchy like Ehrenfest could not provide much support, and many were uncertain about Lord Wolfram becoming the next archduke, even though he was the only male candidate. Once it became clear that the first wife was seeking her own granddaughter's adoption, the faction divide was inevitable."

"And you were asked to serve Lady Detlinde in that political climate?" Fatiehe asked, clearly taken aback. "How bold."

On the contrary. It was a standard noble maneuver.

Martina chuckled. "Father did not recommend me to the aub as a potential retainer for Lady Detlinde; rather, he simply told me to join Lady Georgine's faction. Make no mistake, though—he made sure he had children in the first wife's faction too. I was only chosen to support Lady Georgine because, as I mentioned, my mother was from Frenbtag."

In truth, there were many reasons why Martina had been sent to Georgine's faction. One, Georgine's younger sister had married into Frenbtag, and her husband had become its aub. Two, Ahrensbach's first wife was from a winning duchy, which would have made joining her faction more complicated. Three, Martina's elder sister Aurelia, who had already been sent to Georgine's faction, had sent back no meaningful intelligence. On top of all that, Martina had been of a good age to become Wolfram's second wife or Detlinde's retainer.

"To be honest, I would have appreciated my elder sister being a

bit more competent..." Martina said. "She is so bad at obtaining information and interacting with others that she even chose to be a knight rather than a scholar."

"An understandable decision," Fatiehe replied. "As I recall, Aurelia rarely spoke, and she always wore such a strict, intimidating expression. I am told she married one of the sons of Ehrenfest's knight commander. How is she doing?"

Aurelia's resting expression was certainly cold, and she had very sharp eyes—but anyone who thought she was well suited to becoming a knight was sorely mistaken. Many assumed she was deliberately aloof—even her own father said she was anything but cute—when she was actually a reclusive coward.

Alongside her sister Martina, Aurelia had experienced great animosity as a result of their mother being from a losing duchy. Having a timid personality and an intimidating appearance on top of that had effectively doomed her, which had in turn inspired Martina to always appear bright and bubbly. These efforts to seem more likable had ultimately borne fruit; she was now favored not just by her father but by Georgine and Detlinde as well.

"Lady Georgine incorporated the second wife's faction into her own," Martina continued, "but just as everyone began to think Lord Wolfram would be the next aub, he passed away in a sudden, unexpected accident."

Naturally, all of Ahrensbach had descended into panic. Wolfram's death had meant that Detlinde was the only remaining archduke candidate; those who had already married into other duchies or been demoted to archnobles could not return. The problem for many was that Detlinde had never received the proper education.

"On top of that, Lady Letizia was taken in from Drewanchel, correct?" Fatiehe asked. "I remember it well. Power seemed to have returned to the first wife, but then everyone roused themselves to support Lady Georgine, who had done so much to save Old Werkestock."

Around the time that Lady Letizia arrived in Ahrensbach, the first wife abruptly took ill and succumbed to her poor health. Georgine had subsequently taken her place as first wife.

Fatiehe continued, "Lady Georgine really was considerate of Old Werkestock. She also worked tirelessly to ensure those two couples would not be torn apart by interduchy disputes. It was because I was so inspired to repay her that I decided to serve Lady Detlinde."

"I see," Martina replied with a thin smile. In Ahrensbach, most believed that Georgine had saved Aurelia's and Bettina's marriages charitably and in the name of love. Few realized that the two girls were actually spies sent to gather valuable information about

Ehrenfest.

Not that my sister has actually obtained any. She married into the family of Ehrenfest's knight commander, but even now she is completely useless. Thank goodness for Lady Bettina.

In a problematic turn of events, Aurelia had not sent *any* intelligence back to Ahrensbach, nor had she formed connections with the nobles whom Georgine suggested. She simply kept to herself. Even when Martina had visited for Detlinde's engagement ceremony, she had refused a meeting—though it was still uncertain whether that was by her own will or the wills of Ehrenfest's archduke and knight commander. Not even sending her letters produced any results; Aurelia would speak only of trivial matters such as how well she was being treated.

Just what is she thinking? She is useless no matter where she goes.

Martina was on such good terms with Detlinde that she had been ordered to stay by her side, so she found it hard to gather intelligence on other duchies at the Royal Academy. She had hoped that Aurelia would make up for this in Ehrenfest... but things were not yet going very well.

"So, Martina... why did you choose to serve Lady Detlinde?" Fatiehe asked. "Your father's orders, I suppose?"

"Lady Georgine arranged it, not my father."

Martina had joined Georgine's faction after her baptism, as per her father's instructions, and immediately began gathering intelligence and treating everyone with the utmost politeness. Georgine soon noticed this. "I find girls who are honest and hardworking to be absolutely delightful," she had said. "Become an attendant and serve Detlinde."

Even though my real intention was to become a scholar and serve either Lord Wolfram or Lady Georgine herself.

Still, Martina cast aside her wish and accepted the instruction with a smile, deciding it was the more clever way to live. That very same day, she started training as an attendant under a noble assigned to her by Georgine.

Martina naturally reported the situation to her father, who praised his daughter for putting down such deep roots. As soon as her training began, however, he realized that it was all a devious plan by Georgine to control the flow of information and prevent any complaints from being brought against the situation. Martina's father soon grew irritated that he was receiving barely any intelligence, bemoaned that his daughter was serving the lowly Detlinde, and even started to curse Georgine's name, calling her "Ehrenfest's chamaewarein."

"I consider Lady Georgine to have excellent politicking skills," Fatiehe said, then sighed. "I simply wish she had been a bit more strict

when educating Lady Detlinde.”

Martina agreed, but she also came to Georgine’s defense. “Lady Georgine’s other children, Lady Alstede and Lord Wolfram, were far more normal as archduke candidates. Lady Detlinde seems to be something of a special case.”

It was Martina’s and the other retainers’ duty to keep Detlinde from falling too far in the eyes of other duchies. They had been expected to prop her up and guide her through her graduation without issue—assignments that Martina thought were a lot harder than simply collecting intelligence.

Martina sighed. “Lady Detlinde could not ask for a better role model than Lady Georgine. How, then, did she end up so incredibly thoughtless? It boggles the mind.”

“In a way, it must be nice living in such stupendous ignorance,” Fatiehe intoned.

Indeed, no matter how much care her retainers took, Detlinde remained an unstoppable force of chaos. Each year, she had managed to cause problems through some unnecessary act or another. Worst of all were all the rude and careless remarks she had made during tea parties, when her attendants were powerless to stop her.

Fatiehe continued, “This year was her big finish—one last punishment for us to endure. Any hope I was clinging to slipped through my fingers like sand, and although it was my own graduation ceremony too, I could not muster even a shred of delight.”

By collapsing during her dedication whirl, Detlinde had brought unprecedented shame upon herself. Her retainers hadn’t spoken a word during the lunch that followed; Ahrensbach’s dining hall had been engulfed in silence. Then, while they were preparing for the afternoon ceremony, an ordonnanz had arrived from the royal family. Ferdinand was to be questioned about his fiancée’s status. It was clear to all that he was going to be thoroughly rebuked.

“Though the Sovereign temple *did* make things easier,” Martina said. During the afternoon ceremony, the Sovereign High Bishop had announced that the magic circle everyone saw during Detlinde’s whirl was for choosing the next Zent, meaning she was suited to the role.

From there, Ahrensbach’s discussion of the graduation ceremony had shifted to the magic circle and the reveal of there being a future Zent among them. They couldn’t speak about how one of their own archduke candidates had committed a grave and shameful blunder that could never be undone, but they *could* discuss how, by making the circle appear, she had achieved something that not even the royal family was capable of. Everyone quickly disregarded the report that Ferdinand gave upon his return from speaking with the royal family—that she had actually failed to activate the circle and thus could not be

considered a Zent candidate.

“Lord Ferdinand said she will never rule Yurgenschmidt, but that matters little to us,” Martina said. “Ahrensbach was not rebuked by the royal family. Now, we must do everything we can to hide our lady’s shame.”

“Right,” Fatiehe agreed. “The priority is avoiding any further troubles in the Royal Academy. Back in Ahrensbach, away from the discerning eyes of other duchies, we can make any problem disappear. Plus, from now on, the jobs of watching and supporting Lady Detlinde will rest with Lord Ferdinand. Our burden is finally being lifted.”

Martina and Fatiehe giggled together. No matter the circumstances, Detlinde had graduated—and that made them happier than anything.

Mere days after Martina returned from the Royal Academy, Detlinde was summoned to Georgine’s villa. “Mother wishes to discuss my future now that I am a Zent candidate,” she explained.

“Ooh, Lady Georgine finished moving while we were in the Royal Academy?” Martina asked, surprised that she had acted so quickly. “I thought she would stay in the archducal living quarters until you finished dyeing the foundational magic.”

The aub had passed away at the end of autumn, but Detlinde had been too busy at the Royal Academy to dye the foundation with her mana. That was why she was still living in the side building for archduke candidates.

There isn’t a single member of the archducal family in the main building. Is that okay?

“Clear the room,” Georgine instructed, so Martina and the other retainers moved to a waiting area. They crossed several nobles along the way. There were more and more unfamiliar faces wandering the villa, Martina thought.

“Were they Lady Georgine’s new retainers?” she asked.

“One of the men had a magic prosthesis for a left hand,” Fatiehe replied. “Perhaps he is another retainer she invited from Old Werkestock.”

“I could not see his hand from where I was standing—his cloak was in the way—but... a prosthesis, hm? How rare. He must have been grievously wounded and not had time to be healed.”

Knights were no strangers to battle, so it wasn’t uncommon to see one with a magic tool prosthesis in place of a hand or foot, but that man had seemed to be a scholar. It was unusual, but there were many in Old Werkestock who had thrown themselves into violent battles during the civil war. Perhaps he had gotten wrapped up in the purge that followed.

“I’m not sure why Lady Georgine would accept someone who needs a prosthesis...” Martina murmured.

“Oh my. Do you question her will?”

“Not at all. I just feel a bit gloomy about what is coming next and wish to distract myself.”

Everyone exchanged glances and partial smiles. To prevent Detlinde from causing problems in the Royal Academy, so much information had been kept from her—but that could continue no longer. Today’s meeting was presumably so that Georgine could reveal the truth.

Martina could already imagine how upset Detlinde was going to be when she learned she was only a temporary aub and that, after her marriage to Ferdinand, a royal decree would force her to adopt Letizia. And when a noble was extremely frustrated, their attendants were often the easiest targets. Martina could not help but feel depressed about what was to come.

“Speaking of which,” Fatiehe said, “do you recall how overjoyed Lady Detlinde was about becoming the next Zent? Do you believe she will accept being an interim aub in these new circumstances?”

“No matter her response, I can say with all certainty that she will never become the next Zent. Ahrensbach needs an aub, and it is not as if we have the Grutrissheit on hand.”

They had all spent so long elevating her, but that was only to make her easier to deal with; not a single one of them actually believed she could be the next Zent. Weighing more heavily on their minds was the future of their duchy.

Fatiehe sighed. “It is troubling that Ahrensbach has only Lady Detlinde and Lady Letizia as archduke candidates...”

“Yes, but once Lady Detlinde and Lord Ferdinand are married, they will also be able to adopt Lady Benedikta,” Martina said, recalling a discussion she had heard. “That will give us one more.”

Benedikta had been born between Blasius, son of the previous second wife, and Alstede, Georgine’s eldest daughter. She was currently an archnoble, but as the child of two former archduke candidates, she was sure to meet the mana requirements to climb back up in status.

“The original plan was for Lady Georgine and Aub Ahrensbach to adopt Lady Benedikta and introduce her to the archducal family after her baptism as Ferdinand and Detlinde’s daughter—but, of course, the aub then passed away.”

“We need more archduke candidates to stabilize our faction, and Lady Benedikta surely has the necessary mana capacity and upbringing. At the very least, she should be more reliable than Lord Ferdinand, born in Ehrenfest to an unknown mother, or Lady Detlinde,

who is... well, Lady Detlinde.”

Georgine and the current Aub Ehrenfest were both descendants of Gabriele, meaning they had plenty of mana, but Ferdinand was a bottom-ranking candidate through and through. Neither Detlinde nor Martina could sense his mana, so he was at the lower end of the archnobles at best.

Martina and Fatiehe giggled again—but this time, an adult retainer who had not gone to the Royal Academy spoke up. “Oh my...” she said, a curious hand on her cheek. “We found Lord Ferdinand to be far more skilled than expected. The scholars were joyously vocal about how much of the backed-up administrative work he burned through.”

“Oh, is that so?” Martina asked.

“Still,” Fatiehe added, “being able to do paperwork is not the same as having an abundance of mana.”

“Hopefully his marriage to Lady Detlinde happens soon so that we have more people available to supply mana. The giebess are all struggling.”

Their innocent conversation continued until the summoning bell chimed, at which point the retainers all leapt to their feet. Martina fearfully entered Georgine’s room, expecting the very worst... but Detlinde actually looked *content*. Georgine was also wearing a faint smile, suggesting that their conversation had satisfied them both.

“Now then, Mother... If you will excuse me.”

“Indeed. See it done.”

Upon returning to her room, Detlinde immediately gathered her retainers. They could not act without knowing what had been discussed and what their lady intended to do next.

“So, Lady Detlinde... what did you speak about with Lady Georgine?”

“Did you discuss the words of the Sovereign High Bishop?”

After sipping her tea, Detlinde grinned at everyone smugly. Her dark-green eyes shone with pride, and with her chest puffed out, she declared, “I will search for the Grutrissheit so that I might become the next Zent. You will all assist me.”

“Did you receive Lady Georgine’s permission?” Martina asked despite herself, wide-eyed. The answer was obvious—Detlinde had come out of her meeting overflowing with confidence—but still... It was hard to believe that she *actually* intended to rule Yurgenschmidt.

Detlinde looked at her troubled retainers and nodded. “Of course. Mother fully supports my resolve. She said that I may do my best to obtain what I desire—that while it may seem impossible at first glance, the tools at my disposal will allow me to succeed.”

It was hard to imagine Georgine saying something so

irresponsible. Detlinde's aim to become the next Zent was worrying enough, but what about Ahrensbach's future? Martina and the other retainers exchanged doubtful glances.

"But if you become the next Zent, who will serve as Ahrensbach's next aub?" someone asked. "As it stands, you are the only archduke candidate equipped to rule the duchy."

"Correct," she replied. "That is why I will only spend a year searching for the Grutrissheit. If my efforts bear no fruit, I will accept becoming the next aub."

Because the death of an aub was always announced during the Archduke Conference, it was sometimes the case that their replacement didn't have enough time to finish dyeing their duchy's foundational magic. Thankfully, Detlinde had been instructed not to mention the late Aub Ahrensbach's death under any circumstances—and with his exact time of death still unknown to other duchies, it would be easy to delay her assignment by a year without raising suspicion.

Could it be that Lady Georgine set this time limit to ease Lady Detlinde into giving up...?

It was hard to imagine Detlinde finding in one year what had eluded the royal family for almost a decade. In other words, this was a bargain: they simply needed to play along with this "search" for a year, then their lady would accept her job as an archduchess. Thinking about it like that helped to calm Martina down.

Lady Georgine is so talented. She really knows how to keep Lady Detlinde under control.

Martina's relief was short-lived, however, as Detlinde placed a contemplative finger on her chin and gazed upward. In most cases, this was a sign that she was about to make a suggestion or give an order that would make everyone else's life much harder. Her retainers knew this from experience and immediately tensed up.

"For this next year, my first priority is to get the public on my side. We shall make allies of all those who want a *true* Zent in power. And if we obtain the Grutrissheit, King Trauerqual will have no choice but to cede the throne to me."

To the retainers' surprise, their lady was actually... making sense. Martina could only assume she was regurgitating advice from her mother—which meant Georgine seriously intended for her daughter to become the next Zent.

Ahrensbach is barely surviving this mana crisis... but rather than chastising Lady Detlinde, Lady Georgine is encouraging her?

All of a sudden, Martina understood nothing of Georgine's intentions. A growing sense of unease began to take hold until she could no longer stay silent.

“Lady Detlinde, I understand that your focus is to become the next Zent, but what about channeling mana into Ahrensbach’s foundation?”

“I suggested that Mother serve as an interim aub. If my one-year search proved unsuccessful, then I would dye the foundation. She refused, however, as she does not wish to become the archduchess. A shame.”

She seemed disappointed, but it was only natural that Georgine would refuse. Maybe she was reluctant to doubt her own mother, but the truth was that not a single Ahrensbach noble would support someone from Ehrenfest becoming the aub—interim or otherwise—when there were still other avenues to explore.

“So,” Detlinde continued, “we have but one option: we shall supply the foundation from the Mana Replenishment hall to avoid dyeing it completely. Letizia will aid us as well.”

“You intend to have a child who has not even joined the Royal Academy help with Mana Replenishment?” All eyes widened at the very thought. Surely it was too great a burden for someone so small.

“In Ehrenfest, archduke candidates start performing Mana Replenishment right after being baptized. It helps them control their mana. They can manage it, so I’m sure *she* can too.” She made sure to punctuate her callous remark with an exceptionally cold glare in the direction of Letizia’s room. Before, she had been too cocksure to even consider Letizia a threat, but something about her had changed.

Seeing the blatant malice in Detlinde’s expression made a shiver run down Martina’s spine—but it seemed that her lady had more to say.

“After all, how would she not? There must be a reason why both Father and the king wanted her to become the next aub. The king even intended to reduce me to a mere interim by royal decree. I can think of nothing more despicable.”

Ah... So she was told.

It hadn’t been apparent at first; Detlinde had been too busy discussing her plans to become the next Zent. Now that the focus of their conversation had changed, however, the sour mood the retainers had all expected was finally shining through.

As the third child of a third wife—and a female one at that—Detlinde had received barely any attention from her parents while growing up. Now, her father was asking her to be an interim for Letizia’s sake, while her mother wanted her to cede the position of aub to Benedikta. Detlinde’s capabilities aside, Martina started to understand why she was more attached to becoming Zent.

“We are struggling enough trying to maintain Ahrensbach’s mana,” Detlinde said. “For that reason, we plan to have Lord Ferdinand oversee religious ceremonies in the temple.”

“The husband of an aub, sent to the temple?!”

“Indeed. He did the same while in Ehrenfest, and we have all seen how useful those ceremonies are.”

Indeed, the Dedication Ritual performed at the Royal Academy with the royal family’s backing had made the power of religious ceremonies all too clear. There were no nobles in Ahrensbach who would agree to enter the temple, but Ferdinand had spent so much time in Ehrenfest’s that he likely wouldn’t oppose the idea.

Martina gave a small nod. “Still, are you okay with that, Lady Detlinde? You were always so openly opposed to marrying an archduke candidate who has been somewhere as repulsive as the temple...” She thought back to how disastrous it had been when her lady first learned about her engagement to Ferdinand. An inescapable royal decree was forcing her to marry an archduke candidate from a bottom-ranking duchy—one who had actually *lived* in the temple. Trying to console her while she wailed and wallowed in misery hadn’t been easy.

That said, after actually meeting with Ferdinand and learning of all his legendary accomplishments in the Royal Academy, Detlinde had started to seem more optimistic about their marriage. It had certainly helped that Ferdinand gave her such a kind smile and promised to make all her wishes come true. Martina remembered thinking that their engagement ceremony was like something straight out of a love story.

It was a very valuable learning experience for me. As long as a woman is pretty and enjoys enough status, men will treasure her. Her personality doesn't matter in the slightest.

“Once I have the Grutrisheit, I can simply *remove* that royal decree,” Detlinde announced with a chuckle. “I would cut him loose in a heartbeat; after all, I think we can all agree that Lord Ferdinand is *not* suited to being the husband of a Zent. I am only allowing our engagement to continue for now so that I am not inconvenienced if my search ends in vain.”

In other words, she intended to force Ferdinand into the reviled temple and make him offer mana to Ahrensbach. Then, after exploiting him to the fullest, she would cancel their engagement at her convenience. It was unbelievably self-serving and almost inhumane, but so was Detlinde. She always said whatever came to mind and never looked to the future. Martina and the other retainers knew this well, so they made no effort to chastise her. Instead, they held their tongues, annoyed about what was to come.

It's obvious how this is going to play out: she won't find the Grutrisheit, then she'll end up needing to marry Lord Ferdinand, whom she forced into the temple she despises so much. I wonder how much she's

going to *whine* then.

"I must do whatever I can to find the Grutrissheit within the time limit," Detlinde said, then a broad grin spread across her face. "Of course, ending my engagement is not the only reason; I am not blind to Ahrensbach's plight. As the next Zent, I will issue a decree reinstating Lord Blasius to the archducal family. Then, I will assign him or my elder sister as Aub Ahrensbach."

"That *would* make the duchy more stable," Martina said. Returning those two demoted archnobles to the archducal family would eliminate Ahrensbach's greatest fear: entrusting its future to Detlinde.

Assuming it ever happens.

Pleased with that response, Detlinde began listing all the other royal decrees she would make.

"Then, after presenting Mother with what she desires, I will search for a husband suitable for a Zent. Incidentally, I am far too wise to carry out a purge as Lord Trauerqual did upon taking the throne. I will respect the existing royal family... to some extent. Perhaps it would be fun to make one of the princes my husband." Her lips curled into a devious smile. "I could steal Prince Sigiswald from Lady Adolphine or Prince Anastasius from Lady Eglantine simply on a whim."

Detlinde had mostly been in the wrong on both occasions, but it seemed she still resented the times she had been scolded during a tea party and mocked.

Well, I suppose there's no harm in letting her fantasize. She'll never actually obtain the Grutrissheit.

"You say that as if making a prince your husband would be simple," Fatiehe said, "but doing so would damage your reputation. Do not forget, Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine are so deeply in love that they abandoned the throne for one another."

Detlinde pouted and drew her eyebrows together in a frown. Martina could tell that her lady was getting annoyed, so she quickly changed the subject.

"On a more important note, what if Lord Ferdinand opposes your decision to cancel your engagement? I expect he would rather be married to the future Zent than return to the temple of a bottom-ranking duchy."

"Oh, that shan't be a problem," Detlinde replied. "I intend to have him give his name so that he won't be able to defy me."

Hearing their lady take name-swearing so lightly had reduced all the retainers to wide-eyed shock. Of course, Detlinde was oblivious to this, and she continued to speak as brazenly as ever.

"As you said, before he came to Ahrensbach, he was stuck in the temple of a bottom-ranking duchy. He should be more than willing to

give his name to the woman he loves. Besides, we cannot have him blabbering about our duchy's secrets once he is sent back to Ehrenfest. The name-swearing is essential; Mother said as much."

That might be so, but I can't imagine Lord Ferdinand ever agreeing to it.

"In fact, I will inform him right now," Detlinde proclaimed. "Summon him."

Martina had no choice but to obey. After all, it was a retainer's duty to accommodate whomever they served—even when their desires were so terribly selfish.

"Lord Ferdinand. You love me, do you not? Then give your name to me."

Ferdinand met this request from his fiancée with a look of surprise. Naturally. Few would appreciate being summoned away from their work to have such a shameless demand thrust upon them.

I don't think Lord Ferdinand will ever agree, but I wonder how he'll get out of this one.

Martina and the other retainers watched on with interest. Detlinde's attendants in particular were always glad to have someone else endure their lady's anger for a while.

"You wish for my name?" Ferdinand murmured after some thought. "Do you mean we should offer our names to each other? I recall that happening in a story about two inseparable lovers."

Martina also recognized that story. Someone had mentioned during a Royal Academy tea party she attended that it was featured in one of Ehrenfest's books.

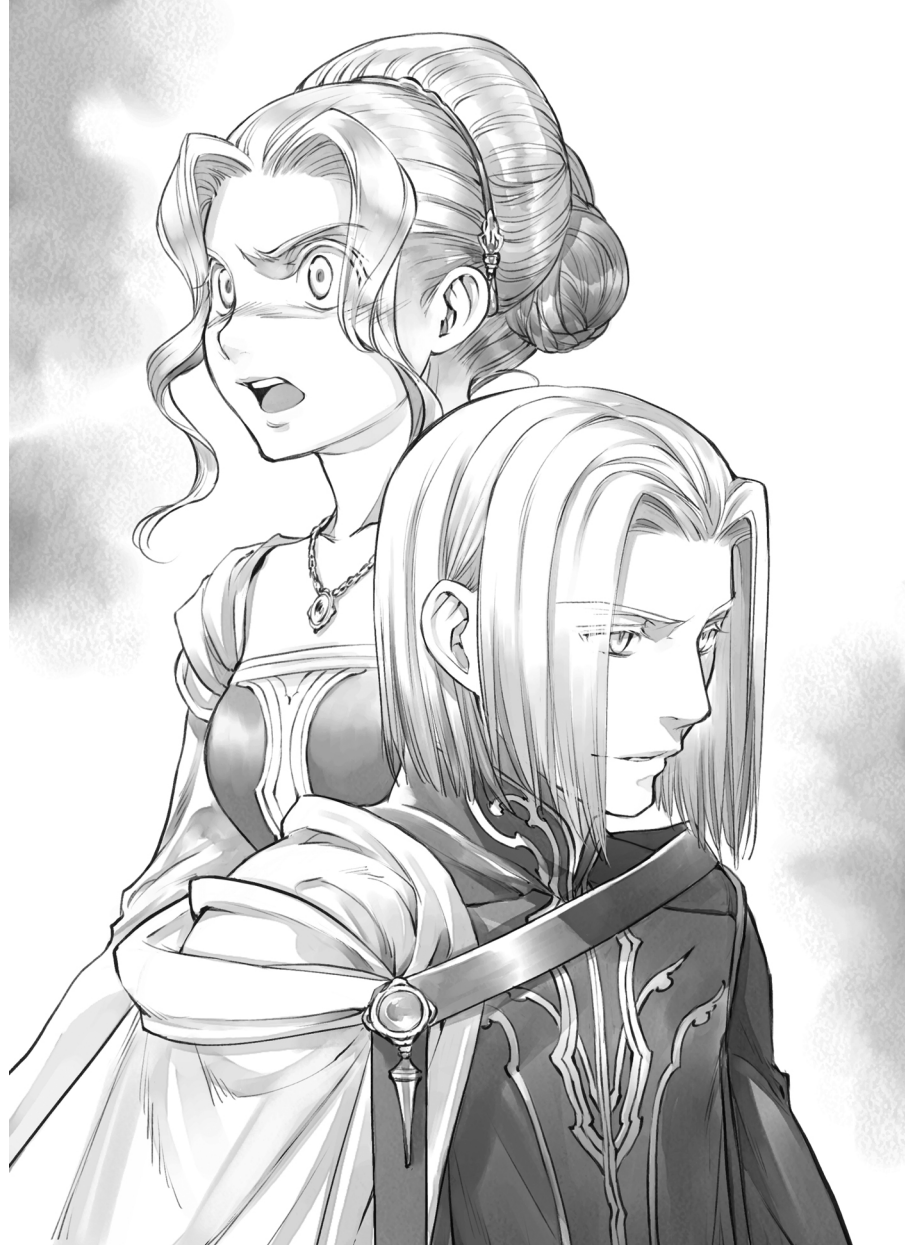
Of course, Detlinde was *not* basing her request on a tale of romance; her motivation was far more inconsiderate. She immediately scrunched up her face and said, "Lord Ferdinand, I see absolutely no reason to give my name to you. To be frank, you should have offered yours to me long ago when I so graciously saved you from Ehrenfest's temple."

Ferdinand slowly shook his head, wearing a gentle smile. "I would grant your wish in a heartbeat, but I do not have a name to give."

In other words... he's already name-sworn to someone else? It was such an unexpected revelation that a stir ran through the room.

"I am your *fiancée*!" Detlinde shrieked, turning redder by the moment. "How could you give your name to someone else?!"

Ferdinand gave a quiet scoff. Despite his smile, his light-golden eyes were bitterly cold and completely devoid of affection. "There have been two women who have sought my name to control me: Lady Veronica, and now you. I must say... the resemblance is uncanny. Like grandmother, like granddaughter."



Demanding someone's name was far from normal. But even after Ferdinand made his displeasure so clear, Detlinde remained painfully oblivious.

“Grandmother?!”

Instead, all she seemed to care about was the grandmother she had never met stealing the name of a man she didn't wish to marry. Little did she know, she had made a false assumption—Martina, Fatiehe, and everyone else there had too. Because of the deceptive phrasing that Ferdinand chose, they were all convinced that Veronica had taken his name. In truth, she had only sought it.

“Do whatever you can to get it back!” Detlinde barked. She glared at Ferdinand, her teeth gritted in outrage, but he merely knitted his brow as if troubled.

“Now that I am a central figure in Ahrensbach's administration, I cannot go back to Ehrenfest so easily. Do you have the authority to let me return?”

It was precisely because Ahrensbach couldn't risk Ferdinand going to Ehrenfest and disclosing sensitive information that Georgine wanted him under control. Sending him back there to obtain his name stone obviously wasn't an option; the nobles working with him had been openly against him even staying a night in the Ehrenfest Dormitory's tea party room, and because Detlinde wasn't yet the aub, she didn't have the authority to overrule them.

“You refuse to grant my wish?! You truly are Ewigeliebe come spring!” Detlinde declared, calling Ferdinand useless to his face. He apologized, but his smile never faltered. In the eyes of Martina and the others, he had accepted the abuse he was now having to listen to.

From there, the already irreparable chasm between the couple grew wider and wider.

Resolve at the Interduchy Tournament

“Lady Lueuradi. I am told you received the divine protection of a subordinate god. Of all the third-years who participated in the Dedication Ritual, you are the only one who achieved this. Congratulations.”

“I thank you. Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts deemed me worthy. I hope to continue praying before my graduation and obtain more divine protections as well.”

As a result of praying to Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts and Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding until right before my final exams, I had managed to obtain Bluanfah’s divine protection. My aim was to obtain Liebeskhilfe’s as well after my graduation, since there was going to be a repeat of the protections ritual.

After I joyfully reported my situation to Lady Muriella and did more to support Ehrenfest’s joint research with Dunkelfelger, she was able to lend me the new volume of *Royal Academy Love Stories*.

This truly is Bluanfah’s guidance!

I delved straight into the new volume, having told my elder sister it was essential reading for Ehrenfest’s joint research. The duchy’s reputation was soaring now that it had demonstrated it could get the royal family involved in research among students. Aub Jossbrenner had advised us to cooperate with Ehrenfest while we still could, so I was putting my absolute all into our collaboration with them.

Just as Lady Muriella had said, this new volume contained the most wonderful scene. In the Goddess of Time’s gazebo, the God of Darkness spread his cape to shield the Goddess of Light. If a man ever did something like that for me, I would end up so embarrassed that I might just run away.

“Lady Muriella, I am here to see your presentation.”

It was the start of the Interduchy Tournament, and my first course of action was to see what Ehrenfest had discovered through its research. Our initial plan had been for Aub Jossbrenner to greet Aub Ehrenfest so that he could express our thanks for the divine protections and strengthen the bond between our duchies—but then we saw the platoon of blue-capes marching toward him and realized we were out of our depth.

My elder sister had slumped her shoulders and suggested that we check again toward the end of the morning. So here I was, viewing the other duchies' research as an apprentice archscholar.

"Good day, Lady Lueuradi. Please have a look. This part of the presentation covers the same information that Dunkelfelger has on display, while this here is Ehrenfest's original research into the Dedication Ritual. The names of the duchies and students who participated are listed over here."

Wait... I'm mentioned in the same breath as members of the royal family!

These new "graafs" they were using were surprising enough, but seeing my name mentioned alongside the royal family? Such an honor was surely unprecedented in Jossbrenner's long history.

"Is it truly that surprising...?" Lady Muriella asked with a giggle. "Lady Rozemyne made it clear that participants would receive a mention, did she not?"

All of a sudden, Lady Muriella gasped. Her eyes were locked on something behind me, so I instinctively turned around. Approaching was Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach, and with her was a man wearing an Ehrenfest cape. He had an attractive face and resembled the man who had appeared out of nowhere during last year's awards ceremony and defeated a ternisbefallen.

"Who is that man with Lady Detlinde?" I asked. "I am sure I have seen him before, but I do not know his name."

"That is Lord Ferdinand, Aub Ehrenfest's paternal half-brother. He served as Lady Rozemyne's guardian, helping her adjust to noble society after she was raised in the temple, then moved to Ahrensbach at the end of autumn when his engagement to Lady Detlinde was decided."

I wasn't in a position to receive reports on the Archduke Conference, so I didn't know any of the details, but I did recall my elder sister mentioning that Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach was getting married as the result of a royal decree.

Lady Detlinde began greeting Dunkelfelger, while Lord Ferdinand went to greet Ehrenfest. The moment Lady Rozemyne saw him, she stood up with sparkling eyes.

"Ah!"

"Oh my!"

Lord Ferdinand reached out and touched Lady Rozemyne's cheek, seemingly caressing her. Lady Rozemyne then covered her face with her hands, doubtless trying to hide her flushed cheeks, and gazed up at him with teary eyes.

There can be no mistaking it. Bluanfah has graced us with her presence.

They were both engaged and in such close proximity to their respective partners, but they were still daring to make physical contact. Deep down, they surely loved each other so very much.

“Lady Muriella,” I said, “that was...”

“It seems Lady Rozemyne uttered something deserving of a pinch.”

“Lady Philine?!”

I received a response not from Lady Muriella but from Lady Philine. Watching the pair with a heartwarming smile, she added, “This is an occasional occurrence in the temple. I expect a lecture from Lord Ferdinand to follow. Or... one would, were this not a public setting.”

“I see,” I replied with a nod, then exchanged a look with Lady Muriella. Her eyes were sparkling as much as my own.

“Oh, right,” Lady Muriella said. “Lady Lueuradi, do have a look at our joint research with Ahrensbach. I can say with all certainty that you will adore it.” She turned her attention to where Ahrensbach was giving its presentation, then started leading the way. I followed alongside her, wondering what she wanted to show me.

“Ahrensbach is presenting a sound-recording magic tool,” she continued, “but to make it clear that Lady Rozemyne was involved, we placed it inside a plush shumil. We also filled it with quotes I selected from *Royal Academy Love Stories*.”

Hold on a moment! Romantic phrases handpicked from Royal Academy Love Stories?!

The very thought made my heart begin to race. Putting such lovely words into a magic tool presented at the Interduchy Tournament... Ehrenfest was the only duchy that would ever have such an idea.

“The lines are spoken by one of Lady Rozemyne’s male retainers,” Lady Muriella continued. “Several were recorded, so please listen to them all.”

I wonder which lines were chosen...

As one of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers, Lady Muriella could not be away from Ehrenfest’s presentation spot for long. She soon hurried off, leaving me to peruse the lower-ranking duchies’ areas on my way to Ahrensbach’s. I could scarcely contain my excitement as I tried to guess which quotes were selected.

That must be the shumil.

I recognized the plush at once. It stood out quite a bit given its unique color and the way it was positioned among several more standard-looking magic tools.

Fraularm was busy addressing some of those interested in Ahrensbach’s presentation. “This research was done by our very own

Lord Ferdinand and his disciple Raimund. Please observe.” She was completely omitting Ehrenfest’s role in their joint research, but that wasn’t particularly rare.

The Interduchy Tournament was held within a circular arena. Spots were given out based on rank, with the topmost duchies receiving the best views of the grounds below. In this case, Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger were situated opposite one another, both with front-row seats.

Odd-numbered duchies were often put on one side of the arena and even-numbered duchies on the other, but placements were sometimes changed when it was determined too risky to position two particular duchies together. This year, it seemed that Drewanchel the Third was being kept away from Gaussbittel the Seventh, and Hauchletzte the Fifth away from Kirschnerreit the Ninth, all because of arguments over who stole whose research. This had resulted in Jossbrenner being next to Hauchletzte.

Greater duchies steal credit for joint research projects as readily as they breathe.

“Professor Fraularm, as I said, this research was done with Ehren —”

“Raimund, it seems that our visitors wish to know how much more efficiently these tools use mana.”

Raimund, a scholar who was likely a mednoble or laynoble, was trying to give Ehrenfest the recognition it deserved. Unfortunately, his efforts to convince Professor Fraularm fell on deaf ears.

“So, we believe research into minimizing mana usage and maximizing efficiency will play a crucial role in our mana-deprived world.”

Watching the apprentice scholars respond to the other visitors’ questions out of the corner of my eye, I picked up the shumil. Then, I touched its feystone and poured some of my mana into it, exactly as Lady Muriella had taught me.

“O my subordinate, may all that is be enveloped in ice and snow. Through mine efforts I shall entomb Geduldh, so do thine utmost to distance Flutrane.”

Oh, how wondrous!

The first phrase the shumil repeated was from a story about a couple at the Royal Academy who could only meet ever so briefly in the winter. Still, they were able to make the most of even the most fleeting encounters. Hearing it read aloud made it feel as though the boy from the tale were speaking to me instead.

“What was that?” someone asked.

Immediately I replied, “A passage chosen specially from *Royal Academy Love Stories*. Hearing it spoken by a man provides such a

unique experience compared to simply reading the book.” I pressed my hands against my cheeks, trying my best to hide the goofy smile that was playing on my lips, then channeled more mana into the tool to hear the next line. It was agony having to maintain my composure while such a kind, soothing voice was speaking words deemed wondrous enough to have been included.

Aah, I wish to discuss this with Lady Muriella at once!

As I stood in a daze, playing one romantic line after another, a crowd of very curious women started to gather around me.

“Our very own novel series, Royal Academy Love Stories, contains many more romantic quotes for women who wish to feel their heart race and men searching for the right words to captivate the girl of their dreams. Get a copy of your own in Ehrenfest this summer. We will also be selling nail-biters like A Ditter Story, Knight Stories, and The History of Dunkelfelger. Priceless stories at reasonable prices!”

The last message was spoken not by the same man but by Lady Rozemyne, and she repeated not words of love but an advertisement for Ehrenfest’s books. Everyone stared at the shumil, taken aback, then a few of the women began to giggle.

“Romantic quotes *and* an advertisement for books, hm? Ehrenfest finds such interesting ways to use magic tools.”

“If all those tender words were from an Ehrenfest book, I must admit, I am very eager to read it.”

I agreed with them both from the bottom of my heart. My desire to read Ehrenfest books was so extreme that I could barely contain it. Oh, how it pained me to think that Jossbrenner wouldn’t be selected as a trade partner until the distant future.

It’s almost too much to bear. I must find some way to marry an Ehrenfest archnoble.

My name and reputation were quickly rising in status and renown because of the divine protection I obtained through Ehrenfest’s joint research. I couldn’t let this opportunity escape me; I was bound to be lost among the crowd once the other students started getting extra protections too.

I shall consult Lady Muriella.

The messages had drawn a lot of attention. Now, there were plenty of people wanting to touch the shumil or observe its magic tool in isolation.

“Oh my!” Professor Fraularm declared, then marched off somewhere in a huff. Seeing her only credit Ahrensbach had made me worry that Ehrenfest was being taken advantage of, but I saw now that there was nothing to fret about.

Satisfied with having heard all of the romantic quotes, I started making my way to Dunkelfelger’s spot. I was curious to see how they

were presenting *their* joint research with Ehrenfest.

All of a sudden, I saw an ordonnanz swish through the air. It landed where the representatives of Dunkelfelger, Ahrensbach, and Ehrenfest were all engaged in conversation, then Professor Fraularm's high-pitched voice rang out. I was too far away to hear what was being said, but her screeching was unmistakable. I certainly didn't envy those standing closer.

I wonder what happened...

As I continued to observe, a group wearing light-violet capes began to move. Perhaps it was some urgent business for Lady Detlinde. Her fiancé Lord Ferdinand stood as well, then gave Lady Rozemyne a gentle smile and placed an affectionate hand on her head.

Aah, Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts!

It was clear to me now—I really had obtained Bluanfah's divine protection. Her lively dance was happening right before my eyes.

I needed someone with whom I could share my enthusiasm, so I made my way to the group of Ehrenfest scholars. "Lady Muriella, may I borrow you for a moment? I have the most important news." She was the only one who would understand this passion burning in my heart.

"Did you see?" I asked.

"After that ordonnanz from Professor Fraularm, how could I not have?" Lady Muriella didn't even need to ask what I was referring to. She looked around cautiously, a bright sparkle in her green eyes, then continued in a low voice, "Back when she was raised in the temple, Lady Rozemyne could only ever be vulnerable around her guardian Lord Ferdinand. She has no doubt failed to notice Bluanfah's visit and is instead clinging to the spear of Erwachlehen the God of Guidance."

"Oh my. Then the rafel grew large in its wait for Efflorelume the Goddess of Flowers. Only when Forsernte the Goddess of Harvests or Jugereise the Goddess of Separation began her fateful whirl was it finally noticed."

Lady Rozemyne's hair, as dark as the blessings of the God of Darkness, had surely trembled in the wind, cold and wet, while she endured such a ruthless attack from Schneeahst the God of Ice. It was so heart-wrenching that just imagining the scene brought tears to my eyes.

"According to Lady Rozemyne's other retainers," Lady Muriella said, "the feelings between her and Lord Ferdinand are separate from love. Still, can you not feel the threads of Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding? And does your heart not tremble as the ordonnanz spreads its wings so wide?"

"Oh, it trembles! I sincerely felt Bluanfah's presence!"

"In our imaginations, we can be free..." Lady Muriella said with a

smile. I agreed completely. There was nothing I wanted more than to read a book about Lady Rozemyne's tragic love story.

"Do you think Lady Elantura will turn this romance into a story?"

"It seems she has a rule not to write about students still attending the Royal Academy."

That was a shame. If the book wasn't published before Lady Muriella's or Lady Philine's graduation, it would be years before it reached my hands.

"You know, Lady Lueuradi... perhaps you could try writing it yourself. You are not aware of our duchy's internal politics or the situation in our dormitory, and you will surely be able to fill the gaps with the most wonderfully imaginative details. Being able to take more creative liberties will also make it harder to tell whom the story is actually based on, which should make it safe to distribute while the student is still attending. Plus, once it has been released, we could give you Ehrenfest books in lieu of payment."

The offer was so tempting that my heart raced. I would receive new books earlier than others as payment for my manuscript. In other words, I wouldn't need to wait for Ehrenfest and Jossbrenner to start trading.

"Th-That is quite an appealing offer," I said, "but I am an archnoble. Mother and Father would scold me for doing the work of a laynoble or a poor mednoble."

"Oh? We may be seeking the assistance of other duchies for future volumes of *Royal Academy Love Stories*, but the first release you loved so dearly was written collectively in Ehrenfest by a group of archnoble housewives."

My heart throbbed. *Archnobles* were taking the lead, writing new books to spread their duchy's printing industry. "It might be best for me to seek an Ehrenfest husband after all."

"Once spring comes and things have settled down, perhaps I could ask for you," Lady Muriella suggested. She was unable to introduce me to anyone herself, but she was at least willing to ask her lady. "We may not be able to find anyone among our duchy's archnobles, though."

My future was opening up... and a path to Ehrenfest was right before me.

I placed a hand on my cheek. "If you really can make good on your offer, I may have a reason to write."

"We always provide fair compensation for any manuscript we receive. You seem to be worried about working for money, but could you not use those funds and any additional royalties to aid your dormitory and give loans to struggling laynobles? Your parents would accept that, surely."

My eyes widened at the novel idea. Meanwhile, Lady Muriella glanced over at Ehrenfest's aub and attending archduke candidates.

"Lady Rozemyne lent money to the students who lost their parents," she continued, her respect for her lady clear in her voice. "They were told that they need only repay her when they graduate."

Just how much was Lady Rozemyne doing? We were the same age, but she was so much more accomplished. It was hard to believe she was human, even.

That reminds me... Lady Eglantine compared Lady Rozemyne to the Goddess of Wisdom, didn't she?

As I recalled those words from the Dedication Ritual, I struck on an idea—I could frame Lady Rozemyne's moving love story as a tale of a goddess. Nobody would think to compare its characters to real people then.

"Lady Muriella... I shall do it," I declared. "I shall write an emotional love story about Mestionora."

"I am eager to see what you create. Please allow Ehrenfest to purchase it from you when it is ready."

It was mostly in fun that I compared Lady Rozemyne to a goddess, but my words were truer than I realized. Around the time my manuscript was printed as a book, she would be widely accepted as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora.

My Daughter's Perspective and Resolve

"We must be taking our leave as well," I said after Prince Anastasius departed. "We have taken advantage of your hospitality for long enough."

On that note, my daughter Hannelore and I gathered our retainers and withdrew. We had spent far longer socializing with Ehrenfest than expected, so we needed to return to Dunkelfelger's spot posthaste.

I have such a terrible headache...

My intention had been to benefit Ehrenfest *and* give two romances a chance to blossom: Lestilaut's with Lady Rozemyne, and Hannelore's with Lord Wilfried. However, when the conversation between our two duchies actually began, it became clear to me that we had fundamentally different understandings of the situation.

It was not just the results of our socializing that pained me; Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach had acted the way Ehrenfest surely believed was common of all greater duchies. I had also borne witness to the gulf that existed between Heisshitze and Lord Ferdinand—something I would need to inquire about later. On top of all that, the royal family had intervened, and Lady Rozemyne had suggested that a dangerous substance known as trug was being used within the Sovereign Knight's Order.

Though I cannot be so quick to believe the words of another duchy.

The assertions of a noble could never be accepted wholesale. It was because of misunderstandings and misleading information that my encounter with Ehrenfest had caused me so much suffering. I wanted to investigate Lady Rozemyne's suggestion to find out whether it was true, but where would I be able to learn about such a rare plant?

The royal family used a sound-blocker. Discussing the matter openly is out of the question.

There was much for me to consider as Dunkelfelger's first wife. Still, investigating trug and the dangers it posed was far from my most pressing concern to deal with.

Hannelore is my top priority.

"We must inform the rest of the archducal family of what the royal family has taught us," I said to one of our attendants while still in my stride. "Prepare a tea party room; we will eat without our

retainers.”

We had just come out of a confidential discussion with the royal family, so nobody would question our decision to eat and speak alone. Under normal circumstances, such arrangements were made as a way to scold members of the archducal family without undermining their authority—but few would realize that unless I said it outright.

I needed to speak with my husband Aub Dunkelfelger and my son Lestilaut, and the pressing matters were Ehrenfest’s desires and the future of my daughter.

However, I must first learn her true intentions.

“Hannelore,” I intoned, “we should take a moment to organize what we just learned. There were no scholars present within the sound-blocker to record what was said.” It was a reasonable enough excuse for a private conversation that none of our retainers would get suspicious, and with that, I presented my daughter with a sound-blocking magic tool.

Hannelore must not have suspected anything either because she accepted the tool without hesitation.

“We do not have much time before we reach our duchy’s spot,” I said, “but I wish to hear your thoughts while Lestilaut is not around to interrupt you. His reports from the dormitory were written very heavily in his favor, it seems.”

Hannelore nodded, her expression a complex mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation; she wanted to voice her opinions but was also reluctant. The confidence she had shown during our conversation with Ehrenfest was nowhere to be seen.

I turned my attention to the various presentations being done by apprentice scholars from lesser and middle duchies; allowing my eyes to wander would make our conversation seem less intense. “To begin with,” I said, “why was it that Rauffen mistook what was very clearly bride-stealing ditter for bride-taking ditter?”

The two variations were worlds apart. Bride-taking ditter occurred when a couple who wished to marry could not obtain approval from one or both parents. Bride-*stealing* ditter took place when someone attempted to break apart another couple and marry the bride-to-be against her will. Rauffen had described the game between our duchy and Ehrenfest as the former, and a contract reinforcing that notion had arrived from the Royal Academy. That had naturally led me to assume that Lestilaut’s feelings for Lady Rozemyne were reciprocated.

“Rauffen would never have permitted a game of bride-stealing ditter,” I continued, “not when Lestilaut was trying to claim an archduke candidate from another duchy whose engagement has already received the king’s approval. I expect he believed that Lady Rozemyne was soft on Lestilaut in turn and was offering them a way

to be together.”

Ditter matches to secure someone's hand in marriage were supposed to be resolved privately between the relevant families, not at the Royal Academy. It seemed reasonable to assume that Lestilaut had deceived everyone so that the game could be played outside the reach of Dunkelfelger's adults.

“So, why did you not correct Rauffen's misunderstanding?” I asked Hannelore. If she had informed us of what was going on, we would have grown suspicious and interrogated our son. At the very least, I would not have entered a conversation with Ehrenfest under the assumption that Lady Rozemyne wished to marry into our duchy.

“I did not know about Professor Rauffen's misconception either; Lestilaut went to great lengths to keep me away while the preparations were being made... It did not even occur to me that his feelings for Lady Rozemyne were an act—not until the game concluded.”

It was only when Prince Anastasius arrived to capture the intruding Sovereign knights that Hannelore realized everyone had seen the game as bride-taking ditter.

That boy of mine...

“So,” I concluded, “Lestilaut was deliberately ambiguous when explaining the situation to Rauffen and others. He also used our duchy's status to strong-arm other students.”

To make matters worse, he had actively excluded his little sister instead of depending on her help. Just what had he been thinking? Keeping her at arm's length and gambling her hand in marriage without her permission were contemptuous things to do to his own flesh and blood.

“I understand now,” I said. “In his desperation for the ditter game to occur, Lestilaut neglected a great many things.”

“Speaking of which... how did Ehrenfest not realize they were signing a contract?”

I sighed; it made sense that someone born and raised in Dunkelfelger would find the situation confusing. “Ditter contracts are so commonplace back home that we can recognize them at a glance,” I said, “but the same cannot be said for other duchies.”

From there, I continued my explanation. Bride-taking ditter in particular was done privately between the families involved, and in the majority of cases, wooden boards were used for the contracts. These contracts did not abide by any strict formatting rules; the only requirements to make them official were the representatives' signatures and an outline of the conditions of the game. If any disputes arose after the match, the families would only need a third party to consult the conditions as they were written.

“However,” I said, “those customs do not apply to those of other duchies. The contract would have sufficed if all parties were in agreement, but Ehrenfest did not know what it was signing. The blame lies with us for not explaining things properly.”

It was hard to say *why* Lestilaut had acted in such a manner. Perhaps he had thought his approach would suffice, since there were no standardized contracts for bride-taking ditte. Perhaps he had expected Ehrenfest to be more familiar with our duchy’s culture. Or perhaps he had another reason entirely... I would need to ask to be sure.

“How do they request funds from their home duchy, then?” Hannelore asked.

“How indeed. I am not that well informed on the bureaucratic processes of other duchies.”

Like my daughter, I was born in Dunkelfelger, which made my being its first wife somewhat unusual. It would have been more ordinary for the archduke to take a first wife from another duchy while I served as the second wife, but the civil war had occurred while he was still searching. The previous aub had not wanted to risk his son’s marriage dragging Dunkelfelger onto one side or the other, so he had forbidden my husband from taking a wife from another duchy until the new Zent was chosen.

The civil war eventually came to an end, but King Trauerqual ascended to the throne without the Grutrissheit. The old aub’s rule had remained in place while we kept a close eye on Yurgenschmidt’s new ruler... and now here we were.

“Let us focus on our own problems rather than those of other duchies,” I said. “Could you not have stopped Lestilaut?”

She shook her head. “Even if I had known about Professor Rauffen’s misunderstanding and the confusion over the ditte contract well in advance, I would not have been able to do anything. Lestilaut rebuked me even in the tea party room, and everyone in the dormitory was beside themselves with excitement. Nobody would have listened to me.”

Apparently, even her own guard knights had continually said, “Fear not. We will win no matter what.” It was a truly headache-inducing scenario, but I could easily imagine the impassioned state of the dormitory.

“Indeed, a mere few people would not have been able to stop such momentum,” I replied. “Even the castle was in a terrible state when news reached us.”

Hearing that a game of ditte was being played in the Royal Academy with Lady Rozemyne’s and Lady Hannelore’s marriages at stake had sent everyone into an excitable frenzy. Dealing with all of

the knights itching to join the match had been exceedingly tedious. I recalled sending them and my husband to the training grounds, suggesting they demonstrate the rituals at the core of our joint research to other duchies.

I sighed again, then gave Hannelore a scrutinizing look. “That said, I find myself distrusting not only Lestilaut but you as well. Is there anything that you are hiding or perhaps intentionally obfuscating?”

“Excuse me...?”

“When did you make this decision to marry into Ehrenfest?” I asked, now with a light glare.

Hannelore turned, looking in the direction of Ehrenfest’s socializing spot, then lowered her eyes. Her lips trembled, but she did not speak.

“During the reports we received after Dunkelfelger lost the ditter match, Lestilaut and Cordula mentioned that you truly wish to marry into Ehrenfest. They said you have hidden those feelings for some time and took full advantage of this opportunity to secure your love.”

As a result, everyone considered the match to have been the result of *two* romances: one between Lestilaut and Lady Rozemyne, and the other between Hannelore and Lord Wilfried. Of course, Rauffen’s claim that it was bride-*taking* ditter had contributed to no small degree.

“Even this morning when we were discussing our then upcoming conversation with Ehrenfest,” I said, “you merely stared at your feet with an ambiguous smile. You denied no reports.”

At the time, I had assumed she was feeling guilty about having made her brother and duchy taste defeat—but that explanation did not mesh with what Lady Rozemyne had said. After the ditter match was initially thrust upon her, she had apparently maintained that, when Ehrenfest proved victorious, she would allow Hannelore to marry whomever she pleased. Yes, the condition had been arranged under the privacy of a sound-blocker, but it still meant that my daughter had not been guaranteed to move to Ehrenfest.

I continued, “Could it be that you had no intention of marrying into Ehrenfest when Lady Rozemyne first suggested that condition? If so, when did you fall for Lord Wilfried and decide to go with him, even at the cost of making us lose the game?”

Unlike during the prior negotiation, Hannelore gazed downward and quietly said, “It was during the match... when Lord Wilfried offered me his hand...”

“Come again?”

“He feared that I was in danger and sought only to save me. I could tell that he cared about me, and I wished to be with him. That

was when I decided to move to Ehrenfest.”

Hearing about her sudden change of heart made my head spin. I never would have guessed that she had fallen for the enemy midway through the game. It seemed that love really could bloom on the battlefield.

Still, she would entrust herself to that momentary impulse and put her entire future at risk? She could very well be deemed a failure of an archducal family member.

Bride-taking and bride-stealing ditter required entirely different strategies, and understandably so—in the former, the treasure wished to be captured, but in the latter, she naturally did not. Hannelore had turned that on its head while the game was already ongoing.

“So, erm, in other words... the feelings might not even be mutual...?” I asked.

“That is correct. However... Lord Wilfried accepted the conditions when he signed the contract, so I do not believe he dislikes me. I even think he would accept the marriage.”

The contract certainly had the boy’s signature. He had even written that he was going to be the next aub. It was also hard to imagine Ehrenfest not wanting to obtain an archduke candidate from a greater duchy.

What a great blunder you made, Lord Wilfried...

Even with Lestilaut being so forceful, only an insane person would sign a contract they did not agree with *and* note that they were going to be the next archduke. It was unbelievably irresponsible.

“Why did you stop negotiating with Lady Rozemyne in that horrible state?” I asked. “She promised she would allow you to marry whomever you wished, did she not? If you had made your feelings clear to her, I am sure she would have done everything in her power to assist you.”

Lady Rozemyne had already shown that she wasn’t afraid to use ditter to her advantage. That, coupled with the promise she had made to my daughter, made it extremely likely that she would have helped Hannelore to marry Lord Wilfried.

“Furthermore,” I said, “Lord Wilfried must have had romantic intentions when he reached out to you. You could have managed depending on how you approached the conversation. You could have used his decision to sign as the next aub and—”

“Stop it, Mother!” Hannelore sharply interrupted. “As I said, I do not wish to burden Ehrenfest any more than I have already. Our duchy has caused enough problems for it and for Lady Rozemyne.”

“Ah yes, there was mention of Heisshitze having created some unnecessary trouble for Lord Ferdinand and Ehrenfest...” I said, reminding myself to interrogate Heisshitze about it later.

Hannelore shook her head. "It was more than just him. The reports you received were reductive and missing many details. Father and Lestilaut always tell me to keep quiet, since the matters have been resolved and Ehrenfest is not suffering for them, but..."

Hannelore went on to explain the recent history between our two duchies. She added the truths that had been left out when the reports were indirectly relayed to me.

"The relationship between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger began when I was a first-year. In an attempt to steal ownership of the library's magic tools from Lady Rozemyne, Lestilaut led a group of students from various duchies and threatened her with the authority of a greater duchy. I did not see it with my own eyes, but I still remember how the blood drained from my face when Cordula told me what happened."

I already knew that a game of *ditter* was played over the royal heirlooms, but the fact that Lestilaut's tyrannical behavior had started it all was heavily abridged in the reports.

"I am impressed that Lady Rozemyne was still willing to be your friend," I remarked.

She continued, "In our second year, Lady Rozemyne was troubled more by Father than by Lestilaut."

During that year's Interduchy Tournament, my husband had apparently used the translation of our duchy's history book as an excuse to force another game of *ditter*. Heissshitz had been defeated, and Ehrenfest had not lost anything in the end, so the details that had reached me were once again heavily abbreviated. Ehrenfest had come across as very assertive during the following Archduke Conference when negotiating the publishing rights, and it seemed that our own *aub* was to blame.

Is it in our blood to be deceptive when reporting details that might inconvenience us?

"As for this year's *ditter* game," Hannelore said, "that was again prompted by Lestilaut. He insulted Lord Wilfried during a tea party, said that Lady Rozemyne is too great for Ehrenfest to hold, and threatened to pressure even *Aub Ehrenfest* himself."

From my daughter's perspective, Lestilaut had told Lady Rozemyne the benefits of coming to Dunkelfelger and then asked her to become his first wife. At the very least, he had not made any romantic proposals or given her a *feystone*.

She continued, "On a related note, I do not know how Professor Rauffen came to believe that Ehrenfest and Lady Rozemyne love *ditter*. To my knowledge, they have never once sought a match; rather, they are always searching for ways to avoid them. I only realized this after our discussion just now, but I am sure that Lady

Rozemyne only sees the game as a means to silence Dunkelfelger and have us accept her demands. At the very least, she does not consider it divine as Lestilaut and the others do.”

Put like that, Dunkelfelger had been anything but kind to Ehrenfest. It made complete sense that Lady Rozemyne had felt compelled to say, “Be silent as losers should be.”

“We have troubled them this much already,” Hannelore said. “Also, I do not wish to be yet another greater duchy archduke candidate who forces a marriage, is reduced to the rank of an archnoble, and spends her life in misery.”

There were many reasons to worry about a minor, inexperienced duchy like Ehrenfest taking in an archduke candidate from a greater duchy. As such, Hannelore’s decision to cast the opportunity aside should have come as a relief.

Now, however...

Ehrenfest’s joint research had made ditler appear more divine to the country at large. Hannelore had also *chosen* to leave her base; rather than being dragged away by her opponents, she had joined them for the sake of more personal objectives. It was like a slap in the face for the knights who had fought with her.

Ah, though Ehrenfest did not consider it a betrayal.

I recalled what Lady Rozemyne had said—that the onus was on Hannelore’s guard knights for abandoning their charge—and shook my head. I could never view joining the enemy and leaving those fighting for your sake as “normal.” How would Ehrenfest have reacted if Lady Rozemyne had taken Lestilaut’s hand, forsaking the safety of her shield after her guard knights were blown away? Would that not have been considered a betrayal, especially if she had never before expressed any feelings for her captor? Or would the blame have fallen on her knights, whose only fault had been drawing their weapons to protect their lady?

Our perspectives are just fundamentally different.

“You have agreed to disregard the clause about your marriage,” I said. “Ehrenfest may have accepted that you acted on impulse, as its students prioritized your safety above all else... but that will not be the case back home.”

After a hesitant pause, Hannelore said, “I understand.” Her desire not to trouble Ehrenfest any further was admirable enough; she knew in great detail what problems we had caused, so it was only natural that she would try to make amends. That said, refusing this wedding was the absolute worst decision—both for our duchy and for Hannelore herself. I would have preferred that she think of some way to apologize to Ehrenfest *after* marrying into it.

“Do you say that knowing how much of an influence your words

and actions have?"

"I... believe so." She was looking down at her feet, so I could not see her face, but her hand was trembling as she clutched the sound-blocker to her chest.

"You took your enemy's hand and abandoned your base. We lost because of your betrayal."

"Yes..."

"You would not have received much of a punishment because your actions happened to benefit our duchy. We would have formed closer bonds with Ehrenfest whether we won or lost."

To be more precise, there were several reasons why Hannelore would have been let off so lightly. Lestilaut had done a poor job of gathering intelligence on his little sister, her betrayal had been interpreted as a plot to realize her true love, she would be marrying into another duchy in a few years' time anyhow, and a connection to Ehrenfest would greatly benefit our duchy. Lestilaut was at fault for not having paid more attention to his sister and was being held responsible for losing our treasured shield. That should have been the end of things.

"However," I continued, "you then declared that you will not marry into Ehrenfest. For what reason, then, did you sabotage us during the ditler game? That is the question you must answer."

The nobles at home would see her as having stomped on her brother's romance before abandoning both her own love and the value that it would have offered. To complicate matters further, we could not change our story and pretend that Hannelore was dragged out of our base after all—her surrender had already been recorded on magic tools.

In our current situation, the blame would sit not with Lestilaut, who had manipulated others into believing the game was bride-taking and not bride-stealing ditler, but with Hannelore, who had willingly left our base, refused to marry into Ehrenfest, and decided not to capitalize on such an excellent opportunity. That she was trying to be considerate would mean nothing to our nobles; they cared only about how her actions impacted our duchy.

"You will soon face the exceedingly harsh winds of all those who consider you a traitor," I said. "Your own actions are to blame, so... prepare yourself."

"I will..."

I could not help but sigh at my daughter, who was hanging her head and trying to accept everything. "You are simply too kind—or perhaps just too willing to suffer on everyone's behalf. Things truly do not go as one wishes."

"Mother?"

The best response now would be to find my daughter a husband in another duchy—to ease the coming winds by showing that she was still valuable. I would tell her that no matter how hard things were now, her suffering would only last a number of years.

But I could never do something so cruel to my daughter, who was even willing to betray her own duchy for love.

I was unsure whether Hannelore truly realized this, but she had thwarted her own duchy in her resolve to marry into Ehrenfest. She was surely heartbroken that her marriage had ultimately fallen through.

“As the first wife, I must protest your resolve and criticize you for what you have done. As your mother, however... I am terribly worried about your future.”

Hannelore looked up at me in surprise, blinking her red eyes a few times as though still processing my words. “Mother, I do not regret my declaration. But, well... My retainers are going to suffer because of my actions. I can only hope that I will one day have an opportunity to wash away this shame.”

Anger began to bubble up from inside of me—not at my daughter, who had acted foolishly on an emotional impulse, but at my son, who had put her in this situation to begin with.

“I understand your perspective and resolve, Hannelore. Now, let us interrogate your brother about *his* perspective over lunch. I expect you to interject whenever he tries to hide or abbreviate details.”

“M-Me?”

“Who else?”

Hannelore inhaled sharply and glanced around in search of support. As we were gripping sound-blocking magic tools, however, her retainers only looked at her quizzically.

“Oh, right,” I said. “I also need to interrogate the aub about his behavior during last year’s Interduchy Tournament. It is doubtless the case that his actions then influenced Ehrenfest’s and Lady Rozemyne’s positions today.”

Lestilaut was not the only egotist in this situation; the aub was guilty too. It was seemingly because he had used our authority as a greater duchy to put pressure on Ehrenfest that we were having to accept their terms for their translation of our history book. Now, Lady Rozemyne and Ehrenfest were using their ditter wins to make us accept all of their demands. I would need to lecture my husband about hiding his involvement in this process.

“Ohohoho...”

“M-M... M-M-Mother...” Hannelore stammered, tears in her eyes. “Please keep it a secret that I have said all these things.”

I gave her a questioning look. “You are not the one at fault here.

Puff out your chest and stand tall as women from our duchy should.” It was a deliberate allusion to their negotiations with Ehrenfest, but Hannelore merely hung her head.

“I am still far, far away from being a proper Dunkelfelger woman.”

Suspicious and Gewinnen

Today really had been packed, what with the Interduchy Tournament's awards ceremony and dinner with Uncle. I'd also learned a lot from watching some triple-layer acceleration brewing—something I could only describe as “superhuman.” It was seventh bell when I finally returned to my chambers. I took a bath, then started to prepare for bed.

“That’s all for tonight, everyone,” I said to my student retainers. “Oswald can take care of the rest.” They still needed to get ready for bed in their own rooms, so I urged them all to leave.

“Lord Wilfried,” said Oswald, my head attendant, “what did you think about how close Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand seemed today?”

I cocked my head at him. We had just eaten dinner with Uncle in the tea party room. Uncle had also checked Rozemyne's health, which was presumably what Oswald was referring to now that we were alone.

After a moment of thought, I said, “It was impressive how they gauged each other's health at a glance. I didn't notice that Uncle looked sick or that Rozemyne had a slight fever.” I also hadn't given any thought to Rozemyne's post-jureve problems. Two years had passed since she'd woken up, so I'd assumed she was all better, but Uncle had said she was still relying on magic tools.

“Did you truly feel nothing else? You looked very surprised when Lady Rozemyne spoke to you.”

“Aah, that. It was because they act so differently around each other. They seemed nothing like they do with Mother, Father, or us.”

Uncle was always so stone-faced; I was pretty sure today was the first time I'd seen his expression soften. The same went for Rozemyne—I'd never seen her so relaxed and vulnerable before. It reminded me a lot of the first time I saw her treat Cornelius as her brother.

“Is that truly all...?” Oswald asked.

“I guess I don't need to hide this from you, but... the way Rozemyne acted with Ferdinand made me think of how I used to be with Grandmother. Relaxed and dependent, I mean. That's why I didn't know what to say. Those two hate Grandmother.”

My grandmother Veronica was said to have done cruel things to both Uncle and Rozemyne. I knew that, but still... Grandmother was

the first family member I'd ever known, and my admiration for her was everlasting. In her care, I'd never had to endure massive workloads or work to tight deadlines; I could spend my days doing whatever I wanted. I'd never expected that to last—I was an archduke candidate, after all—but I was still nostalgic for the unshakable love she had showered me with back then.

“Hold on a moment,” Oswald said. “Do you mean to say that you felt nothing about their public displays of affection?” His tone and expression of disbelief were enough for me to gather that I'd surprised him with my answer, but I didn't have a clue what he'd wanted me to say.

For some reason, I started to feel annoyed. “I told you I was surprised, didn't I? And that wasn't a show of affection; it was a checkup. Uncle is Rozemyne's personal doctor. You've never said anything about it before, so why would it be surprising now?”

“Lord Ferdinand has moved to Ahrensbach and is no longer her primary doctor, so their physical contact was clearly excessive. They were also acting much too close for two people who are already engaged to others. Be more cautious of these matters in the future, Lord Wilfried—especially now that you have developed mana-sensing.”

Mana-sensing was one of the secondary sexual traits that children developed between the ages of ten and fifteen. It provided a way to identify whose mana quantity was similar to your own, and in terms of rearing children, it gave you a good idea of who would make a good marriage partner.

My mana-sensing had developed this winter, after my return to the Royal Academy. I was used to it now, but I remembered how anxious I had been when I first started to feel other students' mana. I could tell whenever a person with a similar mana quantity was close, so I'd needed to exercise a lot of self-control not to look around whenever I sensed someone.

“You remember that Rozemyne hasn't developed it yet, right?” I asked. “What am I supposed to feel for someone whose mana I can't sense at all...?”

It was hard to feel “that way” about someone when you didn't know their mana quantity. Not having a similar amount would make it harder to have children, so pairing with someone whose mana you couldn't sense generally resulted in an unhappy marriage. On an instinctive level, most wouldn't even consider someone whose mana they couldn't sense as a potential partner. I didn't want to be told to view children like Rozemyne or Charlotte, whose mana-sensing hadn't even developed yet, in that kind of way.

“Normally, one would not need to be so sensitive about

interactions with children whose mana-sensing has not yet developed,” Oswald said. “However, Lady Rozemyne is already a third-year and engaged; she must think more carefully about her interactions with the opposite gender. And above all else, Lord Ferdinand must understand that he is no longer her guardian or her primary doctor.”

“But...”

Your whole world changed a lot before and after developing mana-sensing. It was precisely because you could tell who was a potential marriage candidate that you felt nothing for children who couldn’t. I really didn’t think Rozemyne would understand the distance between the sexes if she got an explanation now, of all times. After all, not even I thought anything about her contact with Uncle.

“Lady Rozemyne may struggle to grasp this, but as an engaged woman, she must be more self-aware. Otherwise, she will receive one proposal after another from duchies wanting Ehrenfest’s printing and trends—and *you* will need to pick up the pieces.”

All at once, I remembered everything Lord Lestilaut had said to me and the way Prince Anastasius warned and scolded me. My mood darkened... but Oswald continued anyway.

“To be frank, she should refrain from drawing so much attention to herself and acting in such a way that other duchies will consider her the next aub. You have suffered much due to their criticism... It is my honest opinion that she shows you absolutely no respect despite your engagement.”

Oswald went on to explain how, when the Zent had participated in our joint research, Rozemyne had taken charge instead of trying to prop me up. He added that she had also ignored my position when buying illustrations from Lord Lestilaut and taking charge during the negotiations. Then, to conclude, he said that she should have let me represent Ehrenfest when our joint research with Dunkelfelger received an award.

“I’m not sure about all that,” I said. “Rozemyne knows more about the printing industry than I do, *and* she started that joint research to begin with. There was no place for me on that stage.”

Rozemyne had tried to give me the credit, but I’d naturally refused. It just wasn’t right. She was incredible—and if I wanted to be incredible too, it only made sense that I would need to work for it.

“You are the next aub, Lord Wilfried, which makes you our duchy’s representative. As your sibling and your future wife, respectively, Lady Charlotte and Lady Rozemyne have a duty to offer you their successes. Lady Rozemyne chose not to support you, so we must assume that she wants to rule Ehrenfest herself.”

He was acting like my decision to turn down Rozemyne’s offer

was a mistake, and that made me mad. It was like he was saying I wasn't good enough to be an aub on my own—that I could only manage by stealing the achievements of my little sisters. Lord Lestilaut and Prince Anastasius had already hurt my pride, and now Oswald was doing the same.

Stop! You're my head attendant; don't make me feel even worse!

"To be honest, Lord Wilfried... I am concerned about Lady Rozemyne's status as your father's adopted daughter. I expect he might see the purge as an opportunity to make her the next aub instead. The Leisegangs certainly will. I strongly suggest you approach Aub Ehrenfest and say that, while your engagement to Lady Rozemyne should remain, he should disown her so that she returns to being an archnoble."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "We're not going to disown her. And she's not going to be the next aub either."

Some time ago, Rozemyne had outright told Giebe Leisegang that she had no intention of becoming the next aub. She had said the same thing to Lord Lestilaut. It boggled the mind that someone would still doubt her enough to want her removed from the archducal family entirely.

"In the first place," I continued, "Rozemyne is too sickly to rule. Father—"

"I am told that Lord Ferdinand's medicine improved her health. You must also realize that people's feelings and situations change over time."

"What brought all this on?" I asked Oswald, glaring at him. He was being too persistent about doubting Rozemyne.

"The purge. Through it, many of the nobles in support of you and the current aub were arrested. Even those who had committed only the slightest of crimes were challenged. It is hard to believe that Aub Ehrenfest truly desired this. I expect the Leisegang nobles pressured him into..."

Now he was criticizing Father too? That really ticked me off. That purge had been necessary for getting rid of all the dangerous nobles hiding in Ehrenfest!

You should know, Oswald! You should know how hard that choice was for him!

Feelings of defiance were surging through me, and my urge to shoot Oswald down just kept getting bigger. But at the same time, I didn't know how to change his mind or even convey how angry I was feeling.

"I don't want to hear another word from you," I snapped. "I'm going to sleep!"

The next day, I got ready for the coming-of-age and graduation ceremonies. A weird magic circle appeared during the whirling in the morning—and at lunch, Rozemyne received an ordonnanz from the royal family summoning her to a meeting. The afternoon brought even more surprises, with the High Bishop making a bombshell declaration that Lady Detlinde was a Zent candidate, and the unprecedented graduation ceremony ended in chaos.

“Lord Wilfried,” Isidore said upon our return, “you have letters of invitation. How will you respond to them?”

“Now, so soon after the ceremony?”

That seemed suspicious. Socializing season and now the graduation ceremony were over and done with. Everyone was either home already or preparing to leave, so it was very unusual to have received one invitation, let alone several.

Isidore showed me the letters. “These ones are from the lesser and middle duchies that intruded upon our ditter game and are now seeking amends.” Then, he showed me one more. “And this is an invitation to gewinnen from Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel.”

Those who had interrupted our match at the urging of Sovereign knights hadn’t been punished by the Zent, but that didn’t mean they’d been forgiven by the students of Dunkelfelger, where ditter was sacred. The lesser and middle duchies had apparently tried to apologize to them during the Interduchy Tournament, only to be sent away before they could say anything. We were evidently their next port of call.

“Ah, we did have a lot of visitors during the Interduchy Tournament,” I mused aloud. “These duchies didn’t have time to speak with Father after Dunkelfelger refused them, and this is their last chance before the Archduke Conference.”

Unfortunately for them, Father had already returned to Ehrenfest; Mother still wasn’t feeling well, so they had departed together straight after the graduation ceremony. That was probably why the invitations had come to me—I was the next archduke, after all—but it wasn’t my place to handle these kinds of diplomatic matters.

“Turn them all down,” I said. “We have nothing to say to them without Father here. Now, what’s that invitation from Ortwin about?”

“We were so busy with this year’s joint research that we didn’t have much time to socialize. Let’s play one last game to send the year off.”

It was an exciting offer, but Oswald grimaced when he read it. “Do you intend to accept?” he asked me. “For him to have sent this invitation now and at such short notice, he must have some ulterior motive. I expect nothing but trouble...”

“You’re always telling me never to refuse invitations from top-ranking duchies, aren’t you?” I retorted. “Rozemyne gets to have a tea

party with Lady Hannelore. It should be fine for me to meet with Ortwin.”

Rozemyne had received an invitation to exchange some books and illustrations discussed during the Interduchy Tournament. Father had approved their meeting before he left, so it wasn't like socializing was forbidden right now. I understood not to do anything that would impact interduchy relations while he was gone... but surely some gewinnen with a friend was acceptable.

“But, Lord Wilfried—”

“I said I'm going.”

Last night had really strained my relationship with Oswald. I didn't want to listen to his annoying lectures, and it was hard not to think he was looking down on me when he was being so overprotective. It all made me feel so defiant; even now, I was being unnecessarily argumentative with him. I hated acting like a child throwing a tantrum, but something about him just didn't sit right with me.

“Oswald, Lord Wilfried could do with some time to unwind,” interjected Barthold, an apprentice scholar formerly of the Veronica faction who had given me his name. “He is going to be in a very difficult position when he returns to Ehrenfest. Do permit him this opportunity to play with his friend.”

Oswald gave a resigned nod and stood down. I definitely felt more stubborn when Oswald and I were facing each other down, so it was a relief to have Barthold arbitrating. He had given me his name and showed me nothing but dedication, which gave me a lot of confidence. Nobody served me with more care and consideration.

On the same day that Rozemyne went to her tea party with Lady Hannelore, I made my way to Drewanchel's tea party room. Ortwin greeted me when I arrived.

“Hey, Wilfried. I'm glad you could make it on such short notice.”

“We didn't get to play much gewinnen this year, so I'm glad we have this chance.”

As we spoke, I noticed that I could barely feel Ortwin's mana. He definitely had more than me, especially when you took our grades and the duchy rankings into consideration. I was suddenly motivated to compress my mana and catch up to him—and also a little bit proud that I could sense the mana of a greater duchy archduke candidate to begin with.

“Here you are,” he said, offering me a seat.

I sat down, and we exchanged gewinnen pieces to make sure they didn't contain any leftover mana. There were no issues to speak of, so we returned them to one another and each started setting up our side

of the board.

Ortwin instructed an attendant to prepare drinks, then activated an area-affecting sound-blocker so that our retainers wouldn't be able to hear us.

"So," he said, "now that you can sense people's mana, are you going to start preparing an engagement feystone? You don't yet have one for Lady Rozemyne, right?"

"An engagement feystone...?" I replied, trying to hide my nervousness. "Hm, I don't know. I'll probably do that when Rozemyne develops mana-sensing too." It wasn't news to me that you had to give a feystone to your fiancée, but I hadn't even thought about giving one to Rozemyne. Maybe it was because we were so young when we got engaged—or because nobody else had mentioned it.

"Ah, and that hair ornament was to tide her over. It sparkled brilliantly even during whirling practice."

"Huh? E-Er... yeah, that's the idea."

I was even more nervous now. To me, Rozemyne's rainbow feystones were just a hair ornament from Uncle, but to everyone else, they were a placeholder. In other words, my engagement feystone had to be even better.

Hold on. I need to compete with Uncle's charm?

A shiver ran down my spine as I pictured the omni-elemental rainbow feystones and the protective magic circles they contained. I touched the charm on my wrist; it was from Uncle too. Having it on had given me courage before, but now it felt more like a burden. I was overcome with an urge to remove it and then get Rozemyne to remove hers too—and it was then that I remembered what Oswald had said to me.

"Lord Ferdinand has moved to Ahrensbach and is no longer her primary doctor... Be more cautious of these matters in the future, Lord Wilfried—especially now that you have developed mana-sensing."

I see... I really should have been paying more attention to these things.

Instead, I'd simply indulged in nostalgia and acted surprised when I saw how comfortable Uncle and Rozemyne were with one another. I shouldn't have assumed it was okay for them to act so close just because they hadn't seen each other in so long.

"Wilfried, what did Lady Rozemyne say?" Ortwin asked, snapping me back to reality.

I couldn't just sit in a daze; we were partway through a game. I hurriedly moved a spear piece and said, "What about Rozemyne?"

"The royal family summoned her to be questioned during the graduation ceremony, didn't they?"

I took in a sharp breath and frowned, not having expected our conversation to take such a turn. It was true that Rozemyne had gone

to a royal villa to answer Lady Eglantine's questions, but I wasn't supposed to mention that to anyone. Our archducal family had spread the word that she had simply fallen ill again.

"Why do you...? Ah. Lady Adolphine."

I'd worked out the answer to my question before it even passed my lips. Ortwin's elder sister, Lady Adolphine, had attended this year's Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony as the fiancée of royalty. She had presumably been there at lunch when the Sovereign High Bishop made his announcement and it was decided that Lady Eglantine would check with Rozemyne.

"That's right," Ortwin said. "But she was sent back to our dormitory when the ceremony ended, so she didn't hear the report that came after."

Oh. That's why he invited me for gewinnen.

I sighed, now regretting my decision to come here. Oswald had warned me that there would be some kind of ulterior motive. I should have listened to his advice.

"The details will presumably be announced during the Archduke Conference," I said.

"We can't wait that long—not when the Starbind Ceremony comes first. If we assume Lady Detlinde *does* become the next Zent, she will most likely eliminate the current royal family. What will that mean for my sister if she's married to Prince Sigiswald? Our only chance to act is now, before their wedding."

My heart stirred. Ortwin cared a lot about his family and didn't want to leave his sister in a dangerous position.

He continued, "Rozemyne received an abrupt summons from the royal family. Either you went along as her husband-to-be, or your archduke went instead. This was no trivial matter, though, so I assume you still would have received a thorough report in the case of the latter. I mean, you're the next Aub Ehrenfest, aren't you?"

It was Uncle who went with her...

Rozemyne hadn't taken me or even Father, the archduke. Instead, she had gone with Uncle, who wasn't even in Ehrenfest anymore. Everyone had been glad about him accompanying her—he was reliable, so I understood why—but was it not strange to have entrusted that duty to someone now living in another duchy?

Was our... No, was Father's choice wrong? Or is Ortwin mistaken?

My desperate struggle to figure out whom to trust brought a lump to my throat and put me in a cold sweat. I didn't know what to say, so I tried to buy time by staring at my gewinnen pieces.

Conscious of my silence, Ortwin raised an eyebrow at me, his light-brown eyes searching for the truth. "Were you not told anything? I heard that Ehrenfest beat Dunkelfelger at ditter, but could it be that

Lady Rozemyne wished to move there after all...? If you stopped that from happening, I could see her not wanting to share intelligence with you."

I assumed that was also information he'd gotten from Lady Adolphine. He knew about our ditter game and the intruders, but he was filling the gaps in his knowledge with too many assumptions.

"Rozemyne wanted to stay in Ehrenfest," I said with a stern look. "I protected her."

"In that case, she must be exploiting her position as your fiancée while at the same time planning to eliminate you and become the next aub."

I took a second sharp breath. That was more or less exactly what Oswald had said. Did even those of other duchies think that Rozemyne wanted to take my place?

"Or, what, is she already set to be the next aub?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "Rozemyne is sickly and adopted. She's not fit to rule." But even as the words left my mouth, I remembered what Lestilaut had said to me—that Rozemyne was a much better candidate than I was.

Ortwin blinked at me in confusion. "Aren't adopted children more fit to rule than most? They're brought into the archducal family specifically because the aub recognizes their great potential and ability. Or is that not the case in Ehrenfest?"

Another gasp. I was already aware that, in Drewanchel, the aub adopted especially talented nobles. It was a complete meritocracy, and it wasn't rare for adopted children to become the duchy's next ruler. Their house and family would even support them in such cases. Father had said that he adopted Rozemyne to make printing a duchy-wide industry, and House Leisegang was supporting that.

"I can't imagine she'd keep striving to come first-in-class if she didn't intend to be Ehrenfest's next aub," he continued. "It must require an immense amount of effort, especially to beat all the top-ranking duchies."

Rozemyne had the support of the Leisegangs and, as Ortwin said, she had now come first-in-class three years in a row. She was the only one whom Uncle had told to aim so high. He hadn't even asked that of me, the archduke's biological son. Was there some significance to that?

Could it be that... that... no one actually wants me to be the next aub?

At last, I realized the full weight of what Oswald had said to me.

"As your sibling and your future wife, respectively, Lady Charlotte and Lady Rozemyne have a duty to offer you their successes. Lady Rozemyne chose not to support you, so we must assume that she wants to rule Ehrenfest herself."

Did both Ortwin and Lord Lestilaut assume Rozemyne would become the next aub because she wasn't doing the right thing? The thing she should have been doing?

If even Ortwin agrees, then Oswald is right to be so concerned.

I was speaking with an archduke candidate from Drewanchel, a greater duchy. It was hard to imagine him being wrong about this. At the very least, he was surely more correct than Father or Rozemyne. As all this dawned on me, I could no longer deny that I was wrong to lose my temper with Oswald. His warnings hurt to hear, but he was putting my future first and foremost.

Slowly but surely, my frustration with Oswald was turning into a strong distrust of Rozemyne.

Rozemyne is my fiancée, but she isn't devoted to me at all. She also needs to learn to keep her distance from Uncle.

Once I got back to the dormitory, I would apologize to Oswald and reopen that discussion. I needed to learn what Rozemyne lacked and what I needed to keep an eye on.

"Ortwin, thanks to you, I've realized something very important."

"You have?" he asked, baffled.

I lowered my voice and said, "As thanks, I'll tell you something important. I'm not allowed to elaborate, but know this: I've heard that Lady Detlinde isn't qualified to become the next Zent."

I couldn't say anything about the magic circle, but I wanted Ortwin to know that Lady Adolphine wouldn't have any trouble marrying into the royal family. His expression softened in relief, and at last he moved a piece.

"Thanks, Wilfried. Now I can send my sister off without worrying."

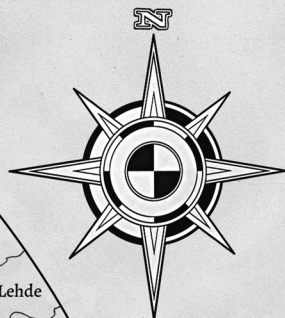
Perhaps because his guard was down, Ortwin made a minor mistake. I wasted no time exploiting it... and thanks to that, I managed to win our last game of gewinnen for the year.



(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

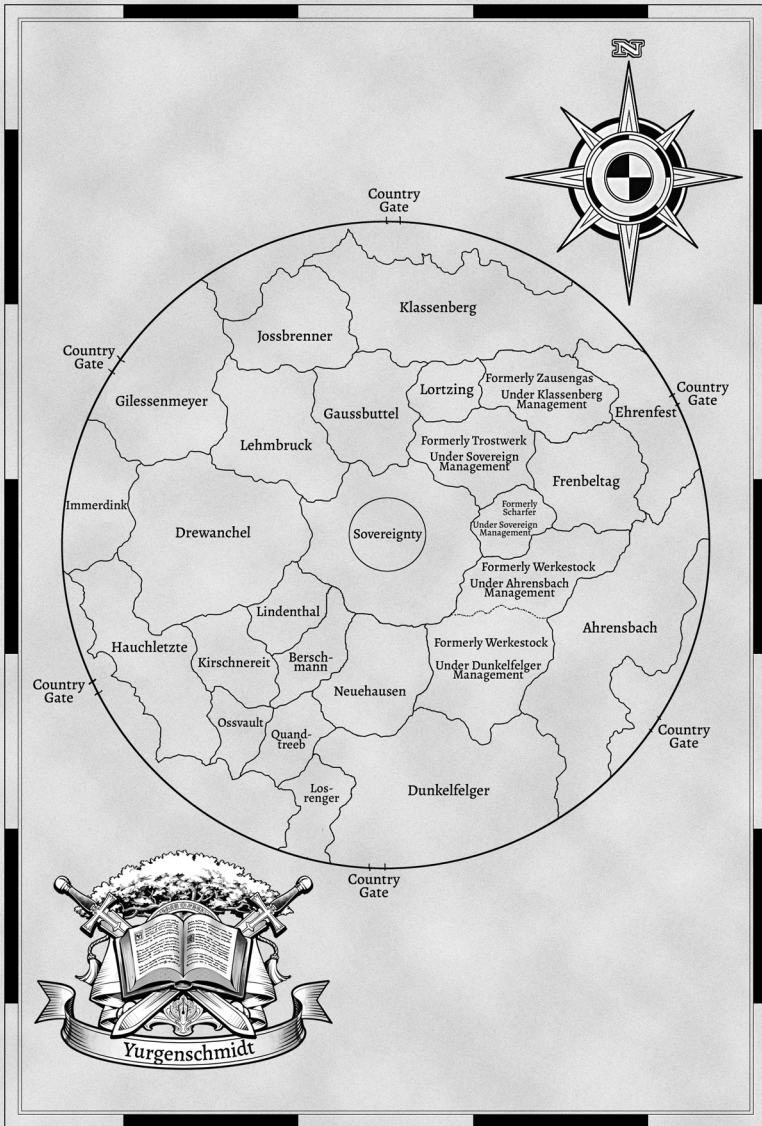
Frenbeltaag Border Gate

★
Ehrenfest
Central District



Country
Border Gate

Ahrensbach Border Gate



Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 3*.

This volume's prologue was written from Matthias's perspective. He was the only one who recognized the smell of trug after the Sovereign knights invaded their ditter match—but when he held a meeting to report that, he got stuck listening to the complaints of two very heated Leisegang nobles. Hahaha. I hope you enjoyed seeing each faction's perspective and a side of Brunhilde and Leonore they would never show their lady.

The main body of the volume begins with Rozemyne waking up. The exchange with her retainers was newly added for the light novel, and I really had fun with it; scenes with girls chattering are just so entertaining to write.

Preparations for the Interduchy Tournament soon led to the Interduchy Tournament itself—and this time, Rozemyne joined Sylvester in socializing with a bunch of duchies. Then, when they all gathered in Ehrenfest's tea party room for dinner, she got to speak openly with Ferdinand for the first time in ages. It came and went in the blink of an eye, but she still really enjoyed it.

The next morning were the coming-of-age and graduation ceremonies. Detlinde, whom you could call the deuteragonist of this volume, really did stand out—especially during her sparkly dedication whirl. But what kind of an impact will that magic circle have...?

The epilogue was written from the perspective of Detlinde's apprentice attendant Martina. I wanted to show what Ahrensbach's nobles think about everything that happened. There are nobles from Old Werkestock among them as well, and everyone has their own reasons for being loyal.

Rozemyne's perspective was chained to socializing during the Interduchy Tournament, which made it hard to show what it was like for other students. Thus, I wrote a short story about Lueuradi, showing how she viewed the tournament. Hopefully it made you feel as though you were there with her!

This volume's first original short story was from Sieglinde's perspective, and the second follows Wilfried's.

Sieglinde's story shows the conversation between a mother and daughter as they make their way back to their duchy's designated

area. Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger have different understandings of common sense, Lestilaut's reports turn out to be misleading... and Hannelore announces her true feelings and resolve.

The story about Wilfried started after his dinner with Ferdinand and ended before his return to Ehrenfest. Although he butted heads with his head attendant Oswald, who has more or less been a father to him since Veronica's detainment, a game of gewinnen with his friend Ortwin caused those frustrations to be redirected at Rozemyne. How will that impact their relationship moving forward?

Only one character received a design for this volume: Sieglinde. She exudes a particular sharpness, and it becomes clear at a glance that she's strong enough to lecture her duchy's rampage-prone men. Although she might say that she can no longer control her son, she can still whip out her schtappe and bind him with light when the need arises. She really is a proper Dunkelfelger woman!

Shiina-sama also came up with new hairstyles for the women who came of age in this volume: Lieseleta, Leonore, and Detlinde. She also put so much thought into designing Detlinde's over-the-top bouffant, even though this is the only time we'll see it. I'm so moved. I really couldn't be more grateful.

This volume's cover art visualizes both the Interduchy Tournament and dinner with Ferdinand. Sylvester is there too. Personally, I think Rozemyne looks especially adorable holding that navy shumil. You can really see how much Lieseleta put her heart into making it.

The color illustration shows the sparkly dedication whirl and the magic circle that arose from it. Please also enjoy Detlinde's mess of a hairdo.

Shiina-sama, thank you as always.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 4.

July 2020, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...

END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

Kyaaaaaaah! ♡

I CAN
FEEL
BLUAN-
FAH'S
DESCENT!

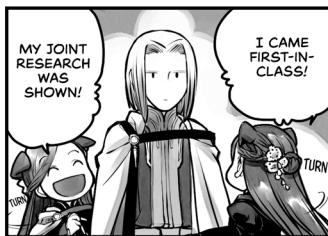
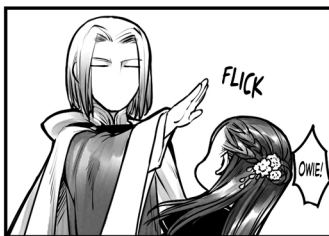
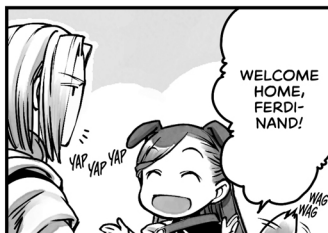
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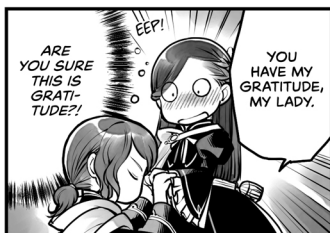
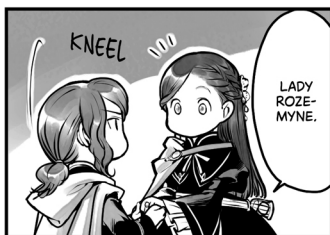
FORBIDDEN
FEELINGS
WITHIN THE
HEARTS OF
THOSE NOW
ENGAGED TO
OTHERS...



REUNION WITH THE PUP



OBLIVIOUS



CAN'T EVEN BE NEARBY









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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 3
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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